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**Three Families, One Country:
Intersecting Paths**

A Study of Hisham Matar

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'The pattern that every human being leaves behind is nothing but their life story.'

-Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*

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Introduction: Connecting Threads

Love, hope, rage, longing, disappointment and uncertainty are some of the most commonly shared feelings among human beings; together with the Libyan political situation following Gaddafi's dictatorship, they represent the main themes underlying the stories narrated in Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men* (2006), *Anatomy of a Disappearance* (2011) and *The Return* (2016). As this thesis will explore, these feelings can take different forms. For instance, love can unconditionally connect the members of a family; together with longing, love can be at the basis of the indissoluble bond that ties individuals to their homelands. Moreover, love for literature and art offers consolation for painful circumstances, has the power to evoke memories and emotions connected to personal experiences and to provide a way to make life more bearable.

Hisham Matar, a Libyan/American writer, was born in 1970 in New York City by Libyan parents; the second of two sons, he spent his childhood between Tripoli and Cairo, the city where his family chose to settle into exile in 1979. He attended both boarding school and university in England, where he first moved in 1986. In 1990, while he was a university student in London, his father Jaballa, one of the most prominent opponents of Gaddafi's regime, was kidnapped by the Egyptian secret service; this event has strongly affected Hisham, and the disappointment and sense of loss connected with it recur frequently in his works. *The Return* won the 2017 PEN America Jean Stein Book Award and the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for Biography or Autobiography. He lives in London and New York, where he is Associate Professor at Barnard College.

Whether in the form of novel, as *In the Country of Men* and *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, or in the form of memoir, as in *The Return*, Matar explores a wide range of issues and situations with extreme sensitivity and attention to detail. In each of these three works, the story of a family is closely intertwined with the political events happening in his homeland, where unprecedented violence and repression are frequent, forcing exile upon the most prominent opponents of the dictatorial regime and leaving indelible marks of suffering.

In the Country of Men, Matar's first novel, is set ten years after the coup that saw the rise of Muammar Gaddafi to colonel and dictator of Libya. The protagonist and first-person narrator is Suleiman, a nine-year-old only child living in Tripoli with his family and already feeling the

weight and the disruptive power of the dictatorship. Suleiman's father, Faraj, is a businessman and an opponent of the regime; he is away from home most of the time and his absence has a huge impact on the stability of his family. As a matter of fact, Suleiman wishes his father were more caring and spent more time with him; then, every time Faraj is absent, Suleiman's mother seems to lose her mind, drinks heavily and keeps telling her son the painful story of her childhood and of how she came to marry his father. While days are marked by naps, nervous breakdowns and visits, Suleiman is overwhelmed by the responsibility he has for his mother, by the halo of mystery surrounding his father and by the disappointing silences that follow his innumerable questions about the real state of things. One day, after a long absence, Faraj comes back home severely bruised and his son's questions and doubts increase even more. In the end, when his family finally seems to have found a balance, Suleiman is sent to Cairo 'to thrive away from the madness' (Matar, 2006: 227) and goes briefly back to Libya only once, on the occasion of his father's funeral.

Then, in *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, the protagonist and first-person narrator is Nuri, a teenage boy who seems to be affected by Oedipus' complex, as he enters an imaginary competition with his father Kamal to win the love of his young stepmother, whom he secretly falls in love with. However, the relationship with his father has always been characterised by unease and embarrassment, due to their inability to relate to each other without the mediation of the mother; in addition, a veil of mystery wraps the father, a former royal advisor and an enigmatic figure whom Nuri does neither know nor see much. While waiting for him to join them in Montreux, Nuri and his stepmother Mona learn of Kamal's kidnapping from a newspaper article. From that moment, no one will ever have news from him and the search for the truth leads nowhere. In the meantime, Nuri is sent to school in England, and only ten years after father's disappearance, stricken with remorse for not having searched for him before, he decides to continue investigating by himself. The discovery that his father had a double life unsettles Nuri deeply, but, in the end, he learns not to judge him. Notwithstanding his father's faults, Nuri's love for him is unconditional and the novel ends on a note of hope that he might come back one day.

Matar's latest work, *The Return*, should be analysed separately from the first two novels as far as genre is concerned. In fact, it is classified as a 'memoir': it recounts the author's first trip back to Libya after thirty-three years of 'forced exile' abroad, in order to discover more about

his father's disappearance and death. The touching narration of the different stages of his return is intertwined with the resurfacing of personal memories, childhood episodes, sensations and reflections, all derived from the encounter with people, places and landscapes belonging to his Libyan past. Although different in form, *The Return* also stresses the importance of the father figure, the mystery of his disappearance, the violence of Gaddafi's regime, and the extent to which it has affected his family. As Matar himself declares in an interview for *The New York Times* 'One of the distinct qualities of this book [...] was its ability to handle different things at once' (Williams, 2016: 2).

Hisham Matar's works touch so many different but strictly connected subjects that isolating one single main theme is almost impossible: exile, silence, unutterable violence, the disruption of families, love, hope, doubts and returns echo through his writings. All these elements can be compared to threads that draw paths across Matar's works, connecting them; they are like the rays of a sun, each one guiding the reader in a different direction, but all pointing towards a place as vast as the sky and the sea, where the space for meditation is unrestricted. The 'Libyan sun' from which all these rays-paths radiate has a name: Jaballa Matar, Hisham's missing father. Both the fictional characters Faraj el-Dewani and Kamal Pasha el-Alfi, the fathers, respectively, of *In the Country of Men* and *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, are largely based on Jaballa's personality. In fact, as this paper will explore, the three father figures encountered in Matar's works share common features that range from their professions, to their personalities, their complicated relationship to their sons and the unfathomable veil of mystery surrounding them and their destinies.

The aim of this thesis is that of analysing the main themes running through the three works, by comparing them and highlighting the similarities and the differences emerging from the parallel. In particular, *The Return* will be given special attention; besides possessing distinctive formal and stylistic/thematic features, it deals with the real events of a country torn by the dictatorship and their inextricable connection with the story of the author and his family. In addition, as Creswell points out, *The Return* does not only deal with the relationship between fathers and sons, but it 'moves outside the claustrophobic triangle of family romance to include the stories of brothers, uncles and cousins' (2016: 2).

After having determined the centrality of the father figure for Matar in the first chapter, the second theme that will be analysed is that of women. The study will focus especially on

mothers and wives, who play a central role in Matar's works; together with their children, they try to come to terms with the absence of their husbands and they represent the fragile bulwark of domestic stability. Moreover, women whose husbands and sons were in Abu Salim prison have created a net of solidarity offering one another support, both material and psychological. Domestic scenes are very frequent in Matar's works; they probably stand for the need to find stability and comfort, which the revolution has undermined by forcing many families to move away and by kidnapping those men who were considered a hindrance by the regime.

Then, a chapter will be devoted to the analysis of the thematic features marking Matar's writing. The recurrent use of physical imagery gives his prose intense lyrical quality, which can be found in the still perceptible touch of the father's hand on the shoulder, in the "material" heaviness of the absence of a father figure, or in the author dwelling on body language. Moreover, Matar's novels are pervaded by smells and perfumes, some left behind by certain characters as a mark of their presence, some emanating from kitchens and living rooms, those places in which the world seems to pause for a moment and give relief from the harshness of life. Then, the sea is an ever-present element in Matar's works; in fact, it is of crucial importance for the author, who looks for it whenever he needs consolation and space for reflection. The sea for Matar is not merely a vast expanse of open water, but it is a living presence that has the power to soothe his aching soul. Another distinguishing characteristic of these books is represented by the semantic fields of light as opposed to shadow and of noises and voices as opposed to silence. As the translator Anna Nadotti observes, *The Return* is made of voices that reveal vast landscapes; the text has the power to create spaces, lights and shadows just as a painting does (2017: 4). In fact, art plays a key role in Matar's search for his father and in some canvases he can recognise his fears and his nightmares; moreover, painting, together with the art of writing, has the power to face sorrowful circumstances directly and try to transcend them in order to make life triumph over death (Bassi, 2017). These stylistic features run throughout his books, connect them and give a detailed picture of Libya and of life under an oppressive regime. Hisham's pen guides the reader under the light of the Libyan sun, which is so strong that it seems to bleach the landscape and is as blinding as truth breaking through the darkness of dictatorship.

Then, exile is a further theme that recurs in Matar's books; whether chosen deliberately to look for better life conditions or imposed by the regime, its impact on the stability and sense of belonging of families and individuals is considerable. As Matar points out in *The Return*, exile is often accompanied by feelings of rage and grief that prevent expatriates from connecting again with their native country (2016: 119). Moreover, a sense of guilt persecutes them for having abandoned their homeland and for living a safe life abroad while their fellow-countrymen and -women are dying brutally and enduring the hardship imposed on them by the regime.

To conclude, the last chapter will be devoted entirely to the power of literature and of stories. In this last section, the analysis will start by exploring the difference between the genres of autobiography and memoir. Intertextuality plays also an important role; in fact, Matar's books are studded with references to other works, ranging from prose to poetry, from *Arabian Nights* to Joseph Conrad and other exiled writers, from *The Odyssey* to Libyan poets such as Rajab Abuhweish. Poetry, particularly loved by Hisham's father, represents a vital form of expression, as it can be transmitted orally and is both a source of consolation and of testimony.

In an article published in *The Guardian*, Hisham Matar writes about an episode happened during his childhood, a couple of years before leaving Libya. One afternoon, while playing under the sun, one of his friends asks him to sketch anything on the sand with a stick he has just found. Hisham decides to draw the map of Libya, but the borders he outlines are inexact, so his friends help him to add the missing details (2016: 1-2). This childhood memory is recalled in the way the author tries to paint a faithful picture of his family and of his country in *The Return*. In fact, he alternates his own memories with the stories told by relations he has not seen in years or are former captives of Abu Salim prison, or by men and women who know his family and are determined to shed some light on the brutality of the regime. Therefore, stories help Matar to complete the pictures of his father, his family and his country with the missing details, and he becomes aware that '[...] through them we can endure great suffering and survive, mostly intact yet altered' (Williams, 2016: 3).

Then, the last chapter will also analyse what might have pushed Matar to write *The Return* and his distinctive approach to writing, according to which, as he states in an interview with

the Italian journalist Benedetta Tobagi, the author places him/herself at the disposal of the book and completely surrenders to it (Tobagi, 2017: 3).

As all great novels do, Matar's works try to answer a central question as well: 'How to live?' (The New Yorker, 2011: 4); in fact, they brilliantly handle different but strictly connected themes, ranging from politics, revolution and exile, to family, art and literature. They provide an insight into how individuals can cope with tragedies, loss and injustice and they paint pictures of landscapes that are highly evocative of states of mind.

Besides being works of extremely high literary value, what makes Hisham Matar's books unique is the impossibility of ascribing them to a specific movement. Actually, they represent an insight into many facets of the human soul; the author explores what it means to be humane, to suffer, to get angry, to love, to have secrets and to rebel against abuses. However, he also explores what it means to be inhuman and to show no respect at all for the Libyan people in the name of the thirst for power. This is the case of Gaddafi's dictatorial regime, a corrupted machine based on repression and terror that has brought a whole country down to its knees, both by keeping its population in a perennial state of poverty and by killing its opponents in the most atrocious manners.¹

Thus, the following thesis will show how these themes intersect and create patterns in and between Matar's works; at the same time, it will highlight Hisham's attempt to draw a complete picture of his father by collecting scraps of information, stories and testimonies. In fact, by returning to Libya, Matar wishes to be able to draw the last mark of this picture, the one he needs to conclude it and that is blurred by the uncertainty and the secrecy about what happened to his father. There is one question in particular lying at the centre of these works, asked by Suleiman in *In the Country of Men*, and that also the other two protagonists seem to ask themselves: 'Can you become a man without becoming your father?' (2006: 149).

¹ See: Adly, F. (2012). *La rivoluzione libica. Dall'insurrezione di Bengasi alla morte di Gheddafi* [The Libyan revolution. From the Benghazi uprising to Gheddafi's death]. Milano: Il Saggiatore.

Chapter 1:

Fathers and sons

The figure of the father represents the main protagonist of Hisham Matar's literary works; even if this figure is mostly absent and, when present, does not take much action – in *The Return*, he appears only in Hisham's memories indeed – the father represents the main thread that links the three books.

The centrality of the father figure for Matar emerges also in a subtle way in expressions he uses in *The Return* when talking about himself or the universal fact that fathers usher their sons into the world. By writing 'It was as if I were a stowaway being claimed back by the fatherland' (Matar, 2016: 137) about his first trip back to Libya after thirty-three years, the author chooses deliberately to use the term 'fatherland' instead of 'motherland'. As dictionary definitions show, it is possible to think about the native country in different ways, and the choice between these two terms reveals the type of relationship an individual wishes to foreground. By choosing 'fatherland', the accent is on feelings of pride and admiration; on the other hand, by using 'motherland' the accent is on the emotional bond and on feelings of love and affection. Moreover, these two sets of feelings are those usually connected with the father and the mother figures.

According to the definitions provided by the *Macmillan Dictionary*, 'fatherland' stands for 'the place where you and your family were born, especially when you feel proud of it' (Macmillan Dictionary.com, 2009-2018), while 'motherland' refers to 'the country where you were born and for which you feel loyalty or love' (Macmillan Dictionary.com, 2009-2018). The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides very similar definitions; in fact, 'fatherland' and 'motherland' are respectively 'the country where a person, or their family, was born, especially when they feel very loyal towards it' (Fatherland, 2010: 558) and 'the country where you were born in and that you feel a strong emotional connection with' (Motherland, 2010: 997). The connection between the native land and the values attached to the father and the mother figures can be seen also in the Italian words 'patria' and 'madrepatria', in which it is easy to retrace the Latin words 'pater' and 'mater', respectively meaning 'father' and 'mother'. In particular, 'madrepatria' is usually defined as the native country with reference to those individuals who live in a foreign country (Madrepatria, 1999: 549).

Matar's choice may have been dictated by the feelings of pride and admiration he harbours towards his father and his engagement for the liberation of Libya, but also the hope that this return may give him back the truth about his father's fate. However, the 'fatherland' can be interpreted as 'the country that separates fathers and sons' and 'has disoriented many travellers' (Matar, 2016: 57); that is, what stands between father and son, increasing their distance, as it did with Hisham and his father, whose political role brought him away from his family.

Then, by resorting to a literary allusion, the author expresses his conviction that men and, more precisely, fathers guide their sons into the world and the touch of their hands remains forever on the sons' shoulders, even when fathers slowly disappear in the background.

Telemachus, Edgar, Hamlet and countless other sons [...] They are men, like all men, who have come into the world through another man, a sponsor opening the gate [...] perhaps with [...] an encouraging nudge on the shoulder. And the father must have known, having once themselves been sons, that the ghostly presence of their hand will remain throughout the years. [...] the shoulder will remain forever faithful, remembering that man's hand that had ushered them into the world (Matar, 2016: 57).

The overall image that emerges from Matar's works is that of a father who is a model to admire, who commands respect, has a prestigious job, is involved in political affairs, loves literature and reading, but is very frequently absent. The fathers in *In the Country of Men* and *Anatomy of a Disappearance* are clearly modelled on Jaballa Matar, Hisham's father, but there are as well some personality traits, behaviours and events that differentiate them and that will be analysed in the following paragraphs.

1.1 Jaballa Matar, the “absent-present” in *The Return*

Jaballa Matar, Hisham’s father, can be considered the main protagonist of *The Return* even if he is absent; in fact, we can only see him and hear his voice through Hisham’s memories and the stories told by those who knew him. As Hisham’s mother Fawzia calls him, Jaballa is the ‘Absent-Present’ (Matar, 2016: 39): even if he is physically absent from the day he was kidnapped, he is always present in their minds and their hearts. Hisham’s willingness to find out what happened to his father turns into an obsession and everywhere he looks, there is always a detail reminding him of the atrocity his father might have suffered. For instance, once walking in New York towards his office, he finds himself looking into a grille on the sidewalk, looking for a trapdoor or any other way out from that small space in the ground. Not finding any, and thinking that his father might be or have been locked up in such a small prison cell, makes him burst into tears (Matar, 2016: 15). Or, when in London, in front of Edouard Manet’s *The Execution of Maximilian* at the National Gallery, he is struck by the white of the executioners’ belts and cannot avoid thinking about the Abu Salim prison massacre, in which his father probably died (Matar, 2016: 183).

Jaballa Matar was not only a loving father with a passion for poetry and football, but he was also a successful businessman and one of the most prominent figures of the opposition in the era of Gaddafi’s regime. By importing products to the Middle East, he had managed to obtain the financial means needed to support his opposition movement and cells, which had training camps in Chad and small secret groups of followers inside the country. In addition, Jaballa’s career in the army and as a diplomat made of him a character dreaded by the regime, which tried several times to corrupt him (Matar, 2016: 4-5). However, Hisham’s father never surrendered to Gaddafi’s strategies nor did he lose his integrity; he did not even tell the names of his fellow-opponents when interrogated in Abu Salim, the prison where he was incarcerated after his kidnap. As he himself writes in one of the very few letters smuggled from prison, ‘[his] forehead does not know how to bow’ (Matar, 2016: 10).

In 1969, the year the year Gaddafi assumed power, Jaballa was in London on a business trip and he heard the news that the monarchy of King Idris had been overthrown. Enthusiastic about the possibility of a republican age in Libya, he rushed to the airport to board a plane for Tripoli. Unfortunately, Gaddafi proved to be a tyrant from the start, ordered the arrest of senior military officers and Jaballa, as soon as he landed in Libya, was incarcerated for five

months. Then, once out of prison, he was stripped of his military rank and sent abroad as a minor diplomat. Gaddafi adopted this strategy with Idris' high-ranking officers, so as not to make them hostile to the regime; in fact, Jaballa was sent to New York as a diplomat for Libya's Mission to the United Nations, and it was in that period that Hisham was born. Later, in 1973, Jaballa decided to resign from his diplomatic role on the ground that he and his wife missed Libya and wanted their children grow there; the regime suspected that this choice was dictated by Jaballa's involvement with the organisation of an opposition, so he became one of the major targets of the colonel (Matar, 2016: 30-4).

Then, in March 1990 Jaballa Matar was kidnapped in Cairo from the apartment where he lived with his family; the Egyptian secret police brought him to Gaddafi, who sent him to 'Abu Salim prison, in Tripoli, which was known as 'The Last Stop' – the place where the regime sent those it wanted to forget' (Matar, 2016: 10).

The same week, Libyan secret service agents and other officials incarcerated Uncle Mahmoud, Jaballa's younger brother, Uncle Hmad Khanfore and cousins Ali and Saleh Eshnayquet, all involved in the action of opposition organised by Jaballa; they were arrested simultaneously and the action was so well organised that each one thought that the others were free. Fortunately, they were released on the 3rd February 2011 together with other political prisoners, in an attempt on the part of the regime to calm things down in Libya while the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions were happening (Matar, 2016: 44-5).

Unfortunately, Jaballa Matar did not appear among those who were liberated that year; according to the letters smuggled from prison and the testimonies gathered by Hisham with the help of international organisations, he was in Abu Salim from March 1990 to April 1996. From the moment when he was removed from his cell, nobody has ever had news about him (Matar, 2016: 11-2). The only conclusion that seems plausible is that Jaballa was shot during the Abu Salim massacre that took place on the 26th June 1996. The absence of information about his father after 1996 has fed both Hisham's sense of uncertainty and doubt and, at the same time, the feeling of hope that his father may be alive somewhere. Even campaigning relentlessly, consulting the main international organisations and talking to Seif el Islam, Gaddafi's son, was not enough to uncover the truth and many questions remain unanswered. However, during the Libyan revolution '[...] all the political prisons [...] were

opened, the men in them released and accounted for. Father was not in any of them. For the first time the truth became inescapable' (Matar, 2016: 12).

The man described so far was Jaballa the diplomat, the opponent of the regime, the organizer of underground dissident cells; a man who devoted his life to ideals such as freedom and justice and invested a large amount of his own resources into this effort. Hisham felt resentful towards his father only when, after the kidnapping, he discovered that they were almost penniless; however, he understood that he had risked so much because he knew he could rely on Hisham and Ziad, his younger son. In fact, as Matar writes, 'His disappearance did put me in need and make my future uncertain, but it turns out need and uncertainty can be excellent teachers' (Matar, 2016: 62).

Next to Jaballa's public figure, there was, at the same time, an exemplary father, a loving husband and a poet. As to his personality, Jaballa was not a very talkative man. For instance, those rare times he accompanied Hisham at the sports club, he avoided mingling with the other parents; he had no interest in chatting with members of the middle class about unimportant matters. In fact, as Hisham describes him, 'He had an astonishing ability to sustain social silences, which is why he was often mistaken for being haughty or cold' (Matar, 2016: 65). His reserve and discretion are probably connected to the importance he gave to words, which is fully realised in his profound love for poetry, both read aloud at social gatherings and composed by himself.

Patience is another quality that characterised Jaballa; as his son Hisham depicts him in *The Return*, he '[...] had always been the very expression of patience' and he would often repeat a line from the Quran as a mantra, saying 'With hardship comes ease. With hardship comes ease' (Matar, 2016: 163). However, when his father Hamed died, Jaballa lost his patience and started to take more risks and be less careful in his activity as an opponent of the regime. In fact, a couple of months after the death of his father, Jaballa was arrested and brought to Abu Salim. A similar 'loss of patience' happens to Hisham in his relentlessly campaigning to find out the truth about his father: in *The Return* Hisham's overall tone is calm and he is very steady even if dealing with painful memories; however, a hint of rage can be detected in the frustration he feels when his appeals are ignored.

The most prominent characteristic and distinctive feature of Jaballa was his voice. Even if this may seem a contradiction, as he was not a very talkative person, his voice was the instrument through which he could delight his guests by reading poetry, recite the *alam* and find consolation when in prison.

To Hisham, his father's voice was not merely a sound, a means to read poems, or a voice like any other, but it was

a voice that seemed to open up a landscape as magically uncertain and borderless as still water welded to the sky. [...] It was like one of those villages perched high in the mountains, reached after too many dizzying turns and arguments (Matar, 2016: 59).

Jaballa would read poems after those dinners they used to have in their Cairo flat; encouraged by his guests and initially reluctant and slightly embarrassed, he would then enchant everyone with his voice. He knew perfectly when and how to use it: he could sustain silences as well as he was able to modulate his voice and touch his listeners' hearts. In fact, for Jaballa, reciting poetry was vital; verse could stop the madness of the world for a moment and set things right. Not only did he read works written by some of the main Libyan poets, but he also composed poems by himself, which he used to recite to Hisham only, when they were driving alone (Matar, 2016: 64-5).

Jaballa's voice was for Hisham a sort of 'village', a safe place where he could find comfort and tranquillity at the end of those lively dinners, a sort of safe harbour in his memories where he can still find refuge whenever he feels lost and challenged by life. In one of her articles, Anna Nadotti compares Matar's style, in particular the imagery found in *The Return*, which she translated into Italian, with the paintings by Tancredi Parmeggiani, a world-famous Italian artist of the second half of the twentieth century. In Tancredi's canvases, as well as in Hisham's works, words, space, light (or darkness), water and air seem to be weaved together as the fibres of a canvas and to open up infinite spaces (Nadotti, 2017:4). The sea and the sky are two ever-present elements in Matar's works and some of the

passages in which they appear evoke in particular one painting by Tancredi, namely *A propos de l'eau* (1958-9). In this painting, shades of white, blue and grey are the unquestioned protagonists, and, in the middle of the canvas, a sort of blurred line separates the painting in two halves as if it were an imaginary horizon dividing the sea from the sky. For instance, this painting comes to mind in front of the window of the hotel in Benghazi where Hisham and his wife Diana stayed: the room was looking out onto the sea and 'the square frame of [...] the window was half sea, half sky' (Matar, 2016: 43). Most importantly, the very same painting can be considered a sort of description of Jaballa's voice, which opened up spaces as vast and endless as the sky and the sea.

When Jaballa was imprisoned in Abu Salim, his voice remained his distinctive mark and the sole source of consolation he could provide not only to himself but also to the other prisoners listening to him. It became the only feature through which he wanted to be recognised in prison, the only one he had the power to preserve unaltered; in fact, prison life, with its harsh conditions and tortures, changed prisoners' appearance irreparably. As many former prisoners told Hisham, when silence fell in the cells, his father could be heard reciting poems tirelessly, 'his voice, steady and passionate' (Matar, 2016: 30).

However, even if voice was Jaballa's distinctive feature, Uncle Mahmoud failed to recognise him in prison: 'Every night, when the prison fell silent, he recited poetry late into the night' (Matar, 2016: 55); but this was not enough for Uncle Mahmoud to recognise his brother at first, who was locked up in the opposite wing. He would have never imagined that Jaballa could be in Abu Salim. After Jaballa gave Mahmoud some hints on particulars their family only could know, he resigned to the idea that his brother was there for real and the thought of it broke his heart.

When despair replaces hope, Jaballa's powerful and passionate voice becomes a low and soft howl 'as though grief were a faraway country [and] he were screaming from a long way away' (Matar, 2016: 162). The first time Hisham heard his father let out such a cry of sorrow was when Grandfather Hamed died; he heard the very same howl of despair at the end of an audiocassette letter that reached him three years after his father was kidnapped. The howl was at the end of the cassette and Jaballa left it on the tape on purpose, so that his family could hear his pain condensed in a sound conveying his unspeakable and bottomless grief better than words.

However, this howl is not the only thing that continues to haunt Hisham; there is also a sort of warning,

an old mysterious instruction that, in the darkest moments and over the past quarter of a century since [he] lost [his] father, would come for [him], sounding with the hard force of a warning bell, urgently ringing *Work and survive, work and survive*. [...] It belongs to some other presence implanted in [him], one that knows better than anyone [...] that [he is] far closer to the precipice than [he] could conceive (Matar, 2016: 142).

Hisham hears this admonition on various occasions after his father was kidnapped, and he keeps hearing it every time he embarks upon a new activity or a new career, helping him to persist and not to let despair have the upper hand. In fact, this warning to work and survive saves Hisham from committing suicide on the Pont d'Arcole in Paris. When Hisham goes back to Libya in 2012, he discovers that his father had published two fictional short stories when he was eighteen; reading that one of those two stories closed with that very same encouragement to "work and survive" is for him at the same time disquieting and comforting (Matar, 2016: 142). This coincidence is a sign that the message came from his father, as if his powerful voice could reach his son even from the isolation of the prison cell and beyond.

1.2 The father figure in *In the Country of Men* and *Anatomy of a Disappearance*

The father figures of *In the Country of Men* and *Anatomy of a Disappearance* present some similarities as well as differences both from Jaballa and between them. As this paper will show, they can be considered "fictional vessels" into which the author projects his fears and anxieties, almost in the same way that Jaballa Matar did in his fictional short stories (Matar, 2016: 141).

The father of *In the Country of Men* is Faraj el-Dewani, and, in the eyes of his nine-year-old son Suleiman, he is 'a businessman who travelled the world looking for beautiful things and

animals and trees to bring to [Libya]' (Matar, 2006: 24). What Suleiman did not and could not know both because of the naivety due to his young age, and because of all the questions that went unanswered, was that his father was one of the most prominent opponents of the regime. The Revolutionary Committee men, who followed Suleiman and his mother whenever they went to the market, surveilled their movements from a car parked outside their house or even visited them from time to time, looking for Faraj (Matar, 2006: 7).

Suleiman's doubts and questions multiply when he accidentally sees his father in Martyr's Square in Tripoli, while he is waiting for his mother to run some errands at the market. He knows that his father is far away for work, probably abroad, which explains his long absence; instead, he is in Tripoli, and Suleiman cannot explain what he sees. Even if he wishes to run towards his father and leap into his arms, he remains motionless, as if dazed and enchanted by his father, because of his air of command, his authority and the confidence he exudes (Matar, 2006: 5-6).

Because of his career as a businessman and his involvement in the opposition movement, Faraj or 'Baba', as Suleiman affectionately calls him, is rarely at home and, when he is with his family, he is distant. In fact, Faraj is mostly engrossed in one of his favourite activities, reading. He is so concentrated that even if Suleiman sits beside him, he does not notice him. As Suleiman says, 'the times [he] felt closest to him were when he was unaware of [his] presence: [he] would study his face as he read' (Matar, 2006: 29). There was also a time in which Suleiman pinched his father repeatedly while he was reading; but, to Suleiman's surprise, he did not feel anything at all. The mother explains that 'he loves his books more than anything else. One day they will come to burn them and us with them' (Matar, 2006: 99).

This detachment, together with the halo of mystery that surrounds his job and his long absences, as he never wants to bring his son in one of his business trips, make Suleiman wish his father were different. Sometimes he envies the relationship between his friend Kareem and his father Ustath Rashid, a university professor who takes them on a trip to Leptis Magna, an activity he would have liked to do with his father as well (Matar, 2006: 25). Other times, he wishes Moosa, one of his father's closest friends, was his Baba. In fact, Moosa visits them very often, takes care of Suleiman and his mother and is the principal male presence when Faraj is away (Matar, 2006: 30). However, Faraj is not totally insensitive to

his son's feelings; he is so occupied with thinking about his business that he simply does not know how to relate to or how to open a dialogue with Suleiman. In fact, the young boy sometimes catches his father staring at him with longing (Matar, 2006: 143).

The relationship between Suleiman and his father is summarised in a dream that the young boy recounts in the novel. He dreams of swimming in stormy seas and of spotting father floating not far from him; therefore, Suleiman makes a great effort and tries to reach him but, when he is almost there, his father, who had been still until that moment, suddenly starts swimming very swiftly and goes so far that his son loses sight of him (Matar, 2006: 84). This dream represents Suleiman's wish to be closer to his father and to receive more attention; Faraj, on the other hand, is even more detached and evasive, with the result that the distance between them increases day by day.

In addition, Baba's long and frequent periods of absence cause the mother to fall into a state of distress and depression; in fact, every time Faraj is away, she drinks heavily, smokes restlessly and keeps telling her son the painful story of how she came to be married to a man who is much older than her (Matar, 2006: 10-11). Therefore, Suleiman has to be the man of the house most of the time and take care of his mother because of her frequent nervous breakdowns. However, when Baba is at home, his mother recovers her sanity, and it is difficult to say if her husband is aware of her instability, as she completely changes attitude.

Absence and longing are what Faraj leaves behind him and what fill his son's and his wife's days; they live in a state of perennial wait for Baba to come back home from his innumerable trips and errands, every time hoping he will to stay a little longer. Strange as it may seem, Suleiman states that 'When he was home, Baba seemed distant. Away he seemed closer somehow, more alive in [his] thoughts' (Matar, 2006: 143). However, one day Faraj goes back home just long enough to have lunch, collects his suitcase and then leaves again, as the Revolutionary Committee men were searching for him. Some time after, the very same man working for the regime that has taken Ustath Rashid, is seen outside Suleiman's house, in a white car, waiting for any clue revealing whether Faraj is a traitor or not. In all his naivety, Suleiman approaches this man, called Sharief, and is willing to help him because he is the only one who answers his questions.

Soon it becomes clear that the Revolutionary Committee men have taken Faraj, and that they are keeping him until they discover how far he is involved in the opposition movement.

Therefore, his wife tries all that is in her power to bring her husband back home: she asks for help to Ustath Jafer, a government official, whose intercession turns out to be vital (Matar, 2006: 157). In fact, the day after Ustath Rashid's public execution, Baba is brought back home by Moosa, who fetches him where he is told to go. When he arrives home, Faraj is all bruised and almost unrecognizable, but he is safe. However, mother's happiness that her husband is back home clashes with Moosa's disappointment; in fact, Faraj, to save himself, decides to be cooperative with the Revolutionary Committee men and to betray both his ideals and his companions.

Suleiman is too young to understand the meaning of loyalty and betrayal and does not judge him for his choices; all he craves for is some attention by his father, but even when he is back home, there is still distance between them, as if they were not able to connect to each other. When Suleiman looks into his father's eyes, he almost cannot find him, cannot recognize Baba in them; when they are alone, Suleiman feels 'nervous in the way you feel when alone in a lift with a stranger' (Matar, 2006: 214).

In the end, this distance becomes even vaster as his parents decide to send him to Cairo to stay with Moosa's family, away from the perennial state of turmoil in Libya and to spare him the military service. Day by day, his native country grows distant in the background, and Suleiman does not consider returning to Libya, even when various government decrees order him to go back to his native country. While Suleiman is in Egypt, Libyan private savings accounts are eliminated by the regime with a deceptive move and Faraj has to work as a machine operator to make ends meet. Some years after this event, Baba is arrested for embezzlement. Thanks to an amnesty, he is liberated but, one month after his release from prison, he dies of heart attack while having lunch (Matar, 2006: 239). As Suleiman learns later through his Uncle Khaled, his father's death was painful, 'he kicked as furiously as Ustath Rashid's legs did above the National Basketball Stadium, clawing at the table' (Matar, 2006: 243); the parallel with the execution makes Baba's death appear as a sort of "punishment" for his betrayal when he was captured by the Revolutionary Committee men.

The only time Suleiman goes back to Libya is for his father's funeral; this event represents the catalyst for his resolution to go back to Egypt and go on with his life, leaving his Libyan childhood behind. Faraj's funeral represents that sense of finality that Hisham Matar covets for his own father; it is the element that allows Suleiman to leave behind all the unanswered

questions, his mother's instability, and all the broken friendships. Now he can try to be the man he wants to be, far from the child who craves for attention, and far from the young boy who has to be the man of the house when the father is absent. Away from his native country, he will try to answer those questions he has asked himself: 'How much of him is there in me? Can you become a man without becoming your father?' (Matar, 2006: 149).

To summarise, the father figure that emerges in this novel is that of a businessman who is involved in the opposition movement in Libya and that is away from home most of the time. His absence weighs heavy both on his wife and on his son, and, when at home, his presence is mostly physical, as he is too much absorbed in his readings to spend some time with Suleiman. One day he is kidnapped by the Revolutionary Committee men and stains his reputation by betraying his collaborators and revealing their names to the regime. The comparison between Jaballa and Faraj is inevitable; they present some similarities and many crucial differences, and Matar may have decided to attribute specific qualities to Faraj in order to project his own fears connected to his father on a fictional character.

In *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, the father of the protagonist is Kamal Pasha el-Alfi, an 'aristocrat who after the revolution moved gradually, but with radical effect, to the left' (Matar, 2011: 26), or 'one of the king's closest advisers and one of the few men who could walk into the royal office without an appointment' (Matar, 2011: 25). This is what Nuri, Kamal's son, has read about his father in the biography of the latest Egyptian king; his new job is a mystery to Nuri, it is a kind of 'secret work' (Matar, 2011: 8) he never hears his father talk about. Even when Nuri is attending boarding school in England, he does not know exactly what to answer when his classmates ask him about his father; back in Egypt, he used to say that he was a retired minister, as his mother had instructed him to say. In addition, his father did not really have a job; he had a 'secret obsession' that he could afford thanks to the money he had inherited from his father. As Nuri says:

Although he never spoke about it, I always had a vague notion of what my father's obsession might have been. Perhaps those silences when someone, usually a guest, mentioned the military dictatorship that ruled our country, or when a visiting relative would say things like, 'The road you are travelling has

only one end' were what told me, even as a young boy, that my father had committed himself to fighting a war (Matar, 2011: 98-99).

Other than being a retired minister absorbed in his secret obsession, Kamal Pasha is a widower who has remarried; his new wife, Mona, is fifteen years younger than him and Nuri, who is a teenager and is discovering puberty and all the drives connected to it, feels a strong attraction towards her. In addition, he enters a sort of 'imaginary competition' with his father to gain her love and have his stepmother all for himself.

As with Suleiman and Faraj, the relationship between Nuri and Kamal is characterised by a sort of uneasiness and detachment that make communication between them difficult. For instance, when Nuri's mother was still alive and the three of them went out eating together, it was as if Kamal felt more confident beside his wife, who could act as a mediator and avoid embarrassing silences. On those occasions, his father was so insecure about how to behave with his son that it was clear that he was forcing himself to look cheerful (Matar, 2011: 8).

When Nuri's mother died, the relationship with his father deteriorated and grew even worse. When they ate together, there was no communication at all; Kamal was so ill at ease alone with his son that he avoided any sort of dialogue and preferred to read the newspaper, also to escape his son glancing at him. He did not even make an effort to be a different father, it was as if 'widowhood had dispossessed him of any ease that he had once had around his only child. [...] He and I came to resemble two flat-sharing bachelors kept together by circumstance or obligation' (Matar, 2011: 8-9). After his first wife died, Kamal was so nervous about having to take care and be responsible for Nuri, that when school started he was even relieved and began to relax and break his silence. Nevertheless, there were also rare and unexpected moments of tenderness and affection in which he cuddled and kissed Nuri; however, in the end, Nuri is told by the housemaid that his father loved him so much that he stiffened when he was with him and that he wished he could be a better father (Matar, 2011: 222).

As well as Suleiman, Nuri has many questions and doubts about his family, but they all go unanswered: his relatives skate over the cause of his mother's death; he does not know why his parents avoided talking about the period they lived in Paris, where Nuri was born. Only

when he and his father are at the National Gallery in London, in front a painting by Turner, Kamal lowers his guard and absentmindedly recalls an episode of when he went to Ischia with his latest wife (Matar, 2011: 77).

As Jaballa Matar and Faraj el-Dewani, Kamal Pasha is kidnapped by order of the regime; that day, he should have joined Mona and Nuri in Montreux to spend their holidays together, but the only thing that reaches them is the news about his abduction. They come to know about it by chance, while reading *La Tribune de Genève*; this article raises even more questions, especially because Nuri becomes aware of his father's double life with another woman.

When Nuri tries to read the article, he is so shocked that his '[...] eyes could hardly focus on the words. Each letter seemed powered by its own little engine' (Matar, 2011: 106). This inability to concentrate when confronted with painful situations recalls that time when Hisham Matar received the first letter from his father, three years after he had been abducted. As he explains in the article *A Letter from the Edge of the Abyss*, published in *The New York Times*, he read it '[...] crouched on the floor [...] as if it contained an explosive device [he] had hoped to render safe; [his] gaze was so determined [he] could hardly see' (Matar, 2016: 175).

Mona immediately contacts all the authorities to search for Kamal; however, hope and relentless investigation are not enough to discover Kamal's whereabouts, and all he leaves behind is an overwhelming absence that weights heavy particularly on Nuri. The investigations and reassurances by the competent authorities eventually turn out to be useless; only some years after his father's abduction, Nuri will independently search for the truth about his father, and he will discover another side of his family, a 'hidden' side he had never suspected. In addition, this inconclusive search for the father reminds vaguely of the relentless search that Hisham Matar describes in *The Return*, in which authorities never provide satisfactory answers and are frequently evasive in giving aid.

To give a further overview, the father figures of Jaballa Matar, Faraj el-Dewani and Kamal el-Alfi present both similarities and differences between them. However, Jaballa Matar can be considered a sort of "model" from which the author took inspiration for outlining the other two fictional fathers. In fact, Faraj and Kamal are probably two similar father figures on which Hisham projects some aspects of his own father and some of his anxieties regarding his family. This way, the sons Nuri and Suleiman become two "fictional vessels" in which

Hisham sees some aspects of himself. In fact, at Cairo airport, his mother had asked him: 'Who's returning? [...] Suleiman el-Dewani or Nuri el-Alfi?' (Matar, 2016: 38).

As to the similarities between these figures, they are all businessmen who are involved in the organisation of the opposition movement in their country. Then, concerning their fates, they all end up kidnapped; however, while Jaballa and Kamal are made to disappear without trace, Faraj is the only one to be released – thanks to his collaboration with the regime – and, years later, to be mourned at his funeral. On the contrary, the circumstances around Jaballa and Kamal's deaths remain unknown. In addition, because of their jobs, the three fathers are frequently away from home; in particular, Faraj and Kamal are too busy thinking about their occupation to give enough attention to their sons, thus creating a painful distance between them.

Matar might thus have used two fictional fathers to see what could have happened, had the course of the events been different. For instance, what if father's frequent absences had increased the distance with his son? Or, what if mother had not been the cornerstone of the family when father was away or when he was kidnapped? What if the mysterious and taciturn father had a double life? How would it have been to mourn your father, to have him back at the price of treason? Therefore, in his first two novels, Matar might be trying to explore different parental figures, different families, and different circumstances, always bearing in mind his own personal and family experience.

1.3 Absence, hope and the fear of transformation

The father figure manifests itself mostly through absence, due both to the profession and the involvement in political affairs, and the subsequent abduction. In particular, the sons feel this absence in an almost physical way, and they describe it as a pain weighing on them, as Nuri does in the opening sentence of *Anatomy of a Disappearance*: 'There are times when my father's absence is as heavy as a child sitting on my chest' (Matar, 2011: 1).

The loss of the father figure is particularly evident in *The Return* and *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, because in these two works, the fathers are made to disappear and what happened to them remains unknown. In Matar's first novel, *In the Country of Men*, however, the element of absence is not so central: the father of the protagonist is released and returns home after a short but unspecified period of detention; then, the nine-year-old

protagonist is too young to understand what is happening. All he craves for are attention and answers that no one wants to – or can – give him.

In *The Return*, the pain caused by loss is accompanied by a great sense of disorientation and panic; this distress manifests itself also at an unconscious level in Matar, who, after his father's abduction, has recurring dreams in which he drifts out to sea rocked by a frightening sense of vertigo. In the two years that precede the Libyan revolution, restless activism and determination fuel what becomes Matar's obsession: the search for the answers concerning the truth on his father's fate (Matar, 2016: 38-9). In fact, the unresolved fate of Jaballa places the author in so empty and so vast a land that he feels disoriented; once deprived of the stability and confidence deriving from the father figure, he feels as if he were disempowered, as if he had no more control over his life. However, nothing is as powerful in conveying this sense of precariousness as the author's own words:

We need a father to rage against. When a father is neither dead nor alive, when he is a ghost, the will is impotent. [...] My ambitions, when it came to my father, were ordinary. Like that famous son in *The Odyssey* [...] I wished that 'at least I had some happy man/as father, growing old in his own house'. But, unlike Telemachus, I continue, after twenty-five years, to endure my father's 'unknown death and silence'. I envy the finality of funerals. I covet the certainty. How it must be to wrap one's hands around the bones, to choose how to place them, to be able to pat the patch of earth and sing a prayer' (Matar, 2016: 34-5).

The absence of the father never leaves Hisham; actually, it haunts him to the extent that he continues feeling the weight of his father's hand on his shoulder, that simple but comforting gesture every son needs. This image, in fact, recurs frequently in Matar's works; in *The Return*, in particular, Hisham continues to feel his father's presence stopping or guiding him, especially when his willingness to discover the truth leads him too far (Matar, 2016: 127).

Matar is unable to write the word 'end' for his father; his absence is so material that it is almost palpable:

Absence has never seemed empty or passive but rather a busy place, vocal and insistent. [...] The body of my father is gone, but his place is here and occupied by something that cannot just be called memory. It is alive and current. How could the complexities of being, the mechanics of our anatomy, the intelligence of our biology, and the endless firmament of our interiority [...] ever have an ending that could be marked by a date on a calendar? [...] The dead live with us. [...] My father is both dead and alive. I do not have a grammar for him. He is in the past, present and future (Matar, 2016: 166-7).

This absence-presence of the father is strictly connected to another main theme of *The Return*: hope. In fact, the hope to find his father or, at least, reliable information on his fate runs throughout the book as if it were a net saving Hisham from falling into the abyss that opens up every time he thinks about what might have happened to his father, wondering why he has not started searching for him earlier.

Then, in *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, the initial delay of the father in joining his family for the holidays gradually becomes an irreplaceable loss, and the protagonist feels overwhelmed by all his doubts and unanswered questions. The absence of the father is comparable to a cloud that expands over the son's life, blurs the borders of his certainties and ends up stifling him. In addition, the protagonist is haunted by a sense of guilt that torments him for not knowing how to throw light on his father's abduction, how to find him, how to be a man like him (Matar, 2011: 108).

Nuri's disorientation results in a need to be reassured, to be next to his mother, whom he misses more than ever, and next to his father, to feel their comforting presence; however, as in *The Return*, the protagonist continues to perceive his father's presence:

A great emptiness began to fill the place of my father. It became unbearable to hear his name. [...] Yet every morning, the moment I opened my eyes, I believed he was there, that I would find him sitting at the dining table, holding a cup of coffee in the air as he looked down at the folded newspaper on his lap (Matar, 2011: 146).

This loss is so painful that, when he goes back to school in Daleswick, Nuri does not tell anyone about his father's disappearance and what happened to him becomes his secret. However, in the end, this discretion starts to weigh heavy on him, and he wants to share his secret with his closest friend Alexei. He wishes to unburden himself from this weight, to share it to make sense of it, but he does not know how (Matar, 2011: 169).

Only years later, when he graduates at the University of London and he is free to decide his own future, he feels confused and overwhelmed by the many options he has at his disposal. Now that he is in complete control of the inheritance his father has left him and has the opportunity to be who he wants, the freedom to choose provides him no comfort at all. Namely, he starts to dream of his father sitting beside him on a bench, uneasy and uttering enigmatic statements. Nuri starts to feel remorse for never having searched for his father before. As he says: 'I began to feel I had been neglecting my father. I saw him waiting in a windowless room. I obsessed about what I could do to find him' (Matar, 2011: 191). From that moment, Nuri decides to investigate his father's fate; what he discovers, however, are not his father's whereabouts but some hidden truths about his family.

Besides the young age at the time of the abduction, what might have prevented Nuri from searching for his father earlier is the sight of the place where he was kidnapped. In fact, when he goes with his stepmother and his family's lawyer to the house from where he was taken, Nuri is very nervous and starts to shiver with fear (Matar, 2011: 118). This episode recalls Matar's refusal to go to visit Abu Salim prison during his trip back to Libya:

I lacked the strength to go to Abu Salim. I worried that if I found myself in those cells I had heard about, imagined, dreamt about for years – dark place where I had several times

wanted to be, so as to finally be reunited with my father – that if I found myself in that place where his smell, and times and spirits lingered (for they must linger), I might be forever undone (Matar, 2011: 46).

For Matar, the hope to find his missing father coexists with the so-called “fear of transformation”; in fact, the author is afraid that prison life and all the tortures his father has endured have changed him not only physically but also mentally. In particular, he is tormented by the fear of not being recognised by his father after all those years and the sufferance his father has endured.

This fear is increased by the stories Uncle Mahmoud and Uncle Hmad Khanfore tell Hisham: in 2001, on the day of the trial the authorities granted to some of Abu Salim prisoners, fathers and sons fail to recognise each other in the courtroom. Uncle Mahmoud cannot recognise his son Izzo, who was a baby when he was arrested; as to Hmad Khanfore, he asks a teenage boy in the courtroom why he is there and, when he hears his name being uttered by the boy, he understands that his son has failed to recognise him. Moreover, these painful encounters are characterised by embarrassment and uneasiness; it is difficult for sons and fathers who have not seen each for years to re-establish a connection. As everyone tends to do when feeling awkward, Mahmoud and Hmad Khanfore try to joke with their children, to show them that everything is all right and, most of all, to hide the grief tormenting them for not having recognised their sons (Matar, 2016: 84).

Hisham’s fear that his father might have become a changed man originates mainly from Uncle Mahmoud’s account of his failure to recognise immediately his brother Jaballa in prison by his voice. Hisham is aware that life conditions in prison can have bewildering effects on prisoners and compromise their ability to understand the situation or believe what they hear or see; however, he is obsessed by the idea that his father might be changed and might fail to recognise him. In addition, he is so tormented by this conviction that he searches for signs of his father’s changes even in the letters he smuggled to them from prison (Matar, 2016: 171). The author also compares this episode to a passage of *The Divine Comedy* in which Dante, once descended to hell, meets Ciaccio, a man he has known in life; Dante fails to recognise him because he has completely changed. Suffering has shaken

Jaballa-Ciacco so much that their interlocutors are not sure they are the same persons they have known outside of Abu Salim-hell (Matar, 2016: 68).

Hisham sees with his own eyes the effects of detention on his cousin Maher, who has a '[...] prison body. That slightly stifled gait all political prisoners have. As though oppression were toxic sediment that lingered in the muscles' (Matar, 2016: 128). All the unutterable violence prisoners see and endure shows on their bodies, which are irrevocably transformed by all the tortures they have undergone.

Moreover, Matar projects his fear of transformation on Faraj, the father figure of *In the Country of Men*, who, after an unspecified period of detention, is released and is allowed to return home. When he goes back to his family he is so bruised and his face is so swollen that his son Suleiman does not even recognise him. In fact, the first days after his father's return, Suleiman is not allowed to go into his parents' room and see him, as he might be shocked by his terrible conditions. Before seeing him, Suleiman hears his voice, as Uncle Mahmoud with Jaballa in prison; however, even if he seems to recognise him, he is so changed that he is not fully convinced that that man is his father:

His voice startled me. It was thick, deep and distorted by teeth and a blocked nose. But the scariest thing was that I could recognize him in it. It was Baba, Baba after he was no longer Baba, maybe even, I thought from within my fear and confusion, Baba after he ceased to be alive (Matar, 2006: 200-1).

Moreover, Hisham Matar projects the same fear of transformation not only onto Faraj, but also onto the mother figure; at the end of the novel the mother travels to Egypt to see her son, and Suleiman is afraid he will not recognise her after fifteen years of distance. In fact, sorrow does not only change those individuals who have suffered the brutality of the regime first-hand, but it reverberates throughout their families, relatives and friends.

This chapter has analysed the three father figures lying at the centre of Matar's books by highlighting the similarities and the differences between them. Moreover, it has intended to explore the relationship between fathers and sons and the ways in which the absence of the father affects families, which are supported by mothers, frail and, at the same time, strong pillars. In the next chapter, mothers, women and wives will be the focus of the analysis and it will be shown how they manage to cope with the pressure of the regime and the absence of their husbands.

Chapter 2

Women, mothers, wives

In the past, in Libya, women were traditionally considered inferior to men; given the centrality of family and marriage in most societies, their role was conceived as strictly connected to the domestic sphere. According to the rules imposed by tradition, they usually married at a very young age in order to be able to take care of their husbands throughout the whole marriage and to bear children in fertile age. In addition, marriages were mainly arranged by families and the groom was usually a relative of the young bride, who had to be a virgin. As a result, marriage was more a civil and religious contract than a personal affair and it aimed at preserving both tradition and the honour of households. After marriage, women were confined to the domestic space, were not allowed to participate in social life and did not enjoy the same rights and educational opportunities as men. Therefore, according to the rules of society, they were subordinate to their husbands, who had to provide for them, and their status was connected to the roles to which they were confined, those of mother and wife (Rashad, H. et al., 2005: 1-2).

Then, throughout the 1970s and the 1980s, the position of women in society improved slowly, and Arab marriage patterns started to challenge tradition by allowing women more freedom in their clothing and their everyday life, and more rights in matters of wedding, education and job opportunities. These signs of change in society were triggered by phenomena such as urbanisation, which weakened family ties existing in rural communities; then, by the influence of new ideas and models coming from European countries and by the wealth deriving from petroleum (La Verle, 1989: 95-98).

The Revolutionary government granted women some rights in matters of divorce and polygyny, and became less rigid towards them, encouraging them to work and to study; nevertheless, Libya remained a traditional and male-centred country in which women suffered discrimination in a society based on inequality. An important aspect of the Revolution that is rarely mentioned is women's contribution to its success. In fact, as many Libyan women who engaged in the revolutionary effort point out, their role is largely undocumented: not only were they spies for the rebels and coordinators of the delivery of

weapons, but they also collected clothes and prepared food for the fighters (Stephen C. et al., 2011: 1).

As to Matar's works, the female protagonists that appear in his books are mainly defined by their roles as mothers and wives and are mostly connected to the domestic sphere and to the attempt to provide some sort of balance to their families. However, it should be made clear that this analysis of the mother figure does not intend to focus exclusively on the limits of women's emancipation in Libya. Instead, it aims to examine closely the ways in which different maternal figures try to cope with the pressure of the dictatorship and with the dangerous political roles played by their husbands; it explores how these mothers act as – or fail to act as – the glue that keeps the pieces of their families together.

Matar's emphasis on domesticity, on rituals such as cooking and on the mother-son relationship intends to show that women, in particular mothers and wives, are usually identified as a source of comfort and stability, a kind of safe haven for the whole family. The mother figures depicted in Matar's works are comparable to the pillars of a building: just as pillars bear the weight of a structure and absorb the concussion of blows, women have to support their families and endure the suffering inflicted by dictatorship. In the end, if blows are too hard to bear, both pillars and women may show the strain and break down.

The mother figures in Matar's books are very different from one another: each one has her own weaknesses and strengths, and they all try to deal with their families' instability with varying degrees of success. On the one hand, the mothers of *In the Country of Men* and *Anatomy of a Disappearance* are affected by recurrent nervous breakdowns, or frequently fall into a deep state of melancholy, which compromise their supportive role in the family. Therefore, their inability to be an anchor for their sons makes the involvement of a third figure, a family friend and a housekeeper respectively, necessary. On the other hand, the mother figure of *The Return*, Hisham's mother Fawzia, has a strong personality and instead of surrendering to sorrow, she is able to react in face of difficulties. She is an inspirational figure for Hisham, and her positive attitude motivates him to look to the future and respond to unfortunate events instead of letting himself be overwhelmed by adversities.

During the Libyan revolution in 2011, Hisham's mother was involved in an underground net of solidarity providing support to those women whose husbands and/or sons had been

incarcerated in Abu Salim prison in Tripoli by the regime. She worked hard to give psychological assistance for many women and to keep them busy with various activities such as cooking and making clothes to prisoners. Its main success was that of saving many mothers and wives from sinking into bottomless despair and of helping them to find the strength to carry on with their lives.

However, Matar did not know anything about it, and his mother had never told him of her involvement in such a praiseworthy initiative. Hisham learned about it only during his return trip to Libya in 2012, when, at the end of a literary event organised for him, a spectator from the public addresses Fawzia to thank her for the great support she had given to his own mother during the revolution (Matar, 2016: 137). In addition, it is on this occasion that the reader discovers the name of Hisham's mother; this 'delay' in revealing her name may reflect the author's wish to separate her from the maternal figures of his novels. In fact, in *The Return*, before telling her name, Hisham describes his mother as an excellent cook and shows her tie to the domestic sphere; this brings her closer to the fictional mother figures of his novels, which identify themselves with the domestic sphere and whose name is never spoken, except for their husbands when in need of help. Thus, Matar decides to reveal his mother's name in its entirety when he wants to remove her from the domestic sphere, show her personal achievements and courage, which distinguish her from the other mother figures appearing in his works.

Family lies at the centre of Matar's books and mothers and fathers, which are the pillars supporting its structure, play a fundamental role in shaping their sons' personalities and views. However, parents' behaviours and personal stories are often a mystery to their sons, who learn hidden truths and how to make sense of them by growing up and forgiving their parents for their failings.

Like fathers, the fictional mothers of *In the Country of Men* and *Anatomy of a Disappearance* can be considered "fictional vessels" embodying some of the author's fears and worries. Even if Fawzia is a very strong woman who does not subside under the blows of the regime, in his first two novels Hisham explores the fragility and the instability that might have affected his mother as well.

2.1 Living under the sword: the Scheherazade-like mother of *In the Country of Men*

In Matar's first novel, the mother-son relationship is central; the plot is characterised by few actions and the story is mainly set in the domestic spaces of the house and the neighbourhood. However, tranquillity at home is disrupted by the violence shown on TV, the visits of the Revolutionary Committee men and the frequent absences and returns of the father figure, all of them affecting/ having an impact on the unusual behaviour of the mother.

The mother figure that emerges in *In the Country of Men* is a very unstable and contradictory character who seems to have a double personality, being well balanced when her husband is at home and slipping into a spiral of depression and grief when he is absent. Her behaviour ebbs and flows continually and the only person who seems to be fully aware of her instability is her nine-year-old son Suleiman. When her husband is away on business, her son is the only one that can keep her company, provide her some kind of comfort and he is the only person to which she can pour out her feelings and her disconnected thoughts. The relationship existing between Suleiman and his mother is rather peculiar, and the mother's predicament is a secret that seems to create at the same time both an intimate bond and a considerable distance between them. In addition, the role of the mother and the role of the son appear to be exchanged throughout the whole novel: whereas the motherly figure should be a point of reference and a source of comfort for the son, it is the nine-year-old protagonist who feels responsible to his mother and wishes to be able to save her from herself.

Even though Suleiman and his mother are 'two halves of the same soul, two open pages of the same book' (Matar, 2006: 9), the young boy feels powerless in the face of his mother's instability, and all he can do is stare at her, hoping that the distance between them does not increase:

Mama and I spent most of the time together - she alone, I unable to leave her. I worried how the world might change even if for a second I was to look away, to relax the grip of my gaze. I was convinced that my if my attention was applied fully,

disaster would be kept at bay and she would return whole and uncorrupted, no longer lost, stranded on the opposite bank, waiting alone (Matar, 2006: 21).

Whenever Faraj is absent from home, his wife radically changes, and her behaviour is so unstable and contradictory she seems to have 'the spirit of another woman in her'. In fact, she starts smoking, drinking heavily from a bottle containing a "medicine" that makes her lose her balance, her eyes glassy and her voice a giggle halfway between laughter and cry (Matar, 2006: 14). Every time she is in this state, she goes back over the day she was made to marry Faraj and starts telling her son jumbled parts of 'that black day as she called it' (Matar, 2006: 11).

These breakdowns are so frequent that they start a routine made of alcohol, cigarettes and painful details of an arranged marriage; Suleiman takes part in this 'ritual' in order to please his mother, hoping it may help to cure her of her 'illness':

I walked to her door, then hesitated [...], happy to play her game, to pretend that some bad dream had broken my sleep. She patted the bed and I lay beside her. Just when sleep was curing itself round me, she started her telling. Her mouth beside my ear, the smell of her medicine alive in the room (Matar, 2006: 11).

Her illness is a secret between them, and Suleiman promises not to share it with anyone; however, this forced silence is a burden for the young boy, made of stories that 'pressed down on [his] chest, so heavy that it seemed impossible to carry on living without spilling them' (Matar, 2006: 19). There is so much unease between them that even those thoughtful little gestures mothers usually make, such as running their fingers through their children's hair, become unpleasant. In fact, Suleiman associates the sound of his mother's fingernails scratching his head with the crackling of insects being squashed; instead of finding comfort

in her gesture, his mind goes back to the day he chewed some ants hiding inside of a date (Matar, 2006: 2).

Suleiman and his mother are “together alone”: they spend most of their time with each other, but there never seems to be real communication; she is ‘like one of those hand-puppets that play dead’ (Matar, 2006: 1) and then suddenly wakes up to play the same game every time. The nine-year-old protagonist is naïve and innocent, and he believes his mother when she says that keeping their secret is vital, otherwise he will have ‘[her] life on [his] neck’ (Matar, 2006: 19). The young boy understands that his family needs help, but the pact he sealed with his mother prevents him from asking for it, and sometimes he looks like a steamer on the verge of explosion:

I held my stomach, doubled over and began rocking. [...] But it wasn't a new habit. I had done this for a long time, she knew I had, to stop myself from talking, from repeating the things she had told me when she was ill, the things that upset me to hear, the things she made me promise not to tell a living soul (Matar, 2016: 98).

No one in the family and friends circle seems to know about the mother's unstable behaviour; neither Faraj nor Moosa, one of father's closest friends, have a clue of her breakdowns, as she behaves normally whenever they are around the house. However, in the novel there are three characters who simply pretend not to see and keep at a distance, and this is the case with Auntie Salma, Mama's dearest friend, the baker and Signor Il Calzoni, the owner of a restaurant by the sea in Gergarish. One of those days when Mama was ill and fainted on the ground, Suleiman, who was panicking, answered the door and opened it, without thinking that he did not have to let anybody in the house in those days. In the end, after having seen her friend in such conditions and helped her up, Auntie Salma never showed up again (Matar, 2006: 40).

Signor Il Calzoni's restaurant and the bakery, together with the market square, are those places where the mother, ‘as was usual on the mornings after she had been ill, [...] took

[Suleiman] on a drive to pull [him] out of [his] silence, to return [him] to [himself] again' (Matar, 2006: 2). In particular, they went to the restaurant in Gergarish when his mother had been very ill the night before; during lunch, they usually talk a lot and laugh, and sometimes end up having very animated conversations, concluding with Suleiman crying, doubling over and listening to his mother imploring him not to tell anyone of her behaviour. Whenever they were like this, Signor Il Calzoni would stand at a distance pretending not to look at them (Matar, 2006: 20).

Then, on the way home from Gergarish, they usually stop by Majdi's bakery at a time when it is empty, and the baker gives the mother a bottle of liquor, that Suleiman calls "medicine", knowing that it is bad for both of them. 'But, doubtful of the world and [his] place in it, [he] said nothing' (Matar, 2006: 21); Suleiman is the young repository and witness of his mother's secret, but he is unable to grasp both its significance and the course of events in the adult world, a place that gives no answers to his many questions. Moreover, he is so young and insecure that sometimes he does not seem self-aware at all, as if he was caught in circumstances that are beyond his understanding and he was observing himself from the outside. In fact, in the novel Suleiman frequently utters words such as 'I heard myself say' or 'I felt my head nod' (Matar, 2006: 133).

In addition, he looks up at the world like all children his age do, feeling small compared to the tall buildings and vast spaces that surround him. For instance, when he goes to the market with his mother, he feels tiny in front of the Septimius Severus sculpture that stands above him, 'pointing his arm towards the sea, [...] a giant blue monster rising at the end of the world'. Moreover, he is amazed by textiles hanging from shops' arches and by the height of the columns of stacked goods. In addition, events are even more beyond Suleiman's grasp when, the same morning at the market, he sees his father, who should be on a business trip, walk fast past him and enter a mysterious building (Matar, 2006: 3-5).

Going back to the motherly figure, it is important to notice that her first name is mentioned only twice in the whole novel, the first time by herself (Matar, 2006: 50) and the other by her husband asking for help (ibid.: 202). This may refer to a sort of de-individualisation that begins with her marriage, the much-dreaded event thrusting upon her the roles of mother and wife that define her public identity. As Suleiman says,

It's very odd to hear your mother call herself by her name, it's very odd to hear anyone do that, but particularly Mama, because almost no one called her Najwa. To me she was Mama, to her family she was Naoma, and to the rest of the world she was Um Suleiman. Baba called her Um Suleiman or Naoma or Mama and only very occasionally Najwa (Matar, 2006: 50-1).

The reader has the impression that the marriage with Faraj, and the responsibilities that derive from it, have swallowed the young girl Najwa once was. Her wedding day, the so-called "black day", represents a particularly painful memory for her: firstly, because her family arranged it in order to stop her from seeing the boy she was dating and to prevent her from dishonouring her family by losing her virginity. Secondly, because she was forced to marry a man she had never met before; in addition, she was terrified by 'what a man had to do to his wife [...] to prove [her] a virgin' (Matar, 2006: 13). According to traditional Arabic marriage model, marriage had nothing to do with romantic love; on the contrary, it is a social contract signed by the families of the bride and the groom with the purpose of preserving the honour of the households.

Thus, when her husband is absent and she is alone with Suleiman, Najwa relentlessly seeks refuge in the past. Uninhibited by the "medicine", she he repeatedly goes back to the day she got married with Faraj, as if telling that story to her son could help her to exorcise the grief connected to that "black day", and search for the girl she was before marriage. However, her telling is never linear, and every time she begins narrating, she starts from a different point in the story, as if following the intricate pattern of her thoughts. Suleiman names Scheherazade on more than one occasion; firstly, he compares his mother to her for the way she tells her story:

She never started the story from the beginning; like Scheherazade she didn't move in a straight line but jumped

from one episode to another, leaving questions unanswered, questions the asking of which I feared would interrupt her telling (Matar, 2006: 11). Every time she would leave something out or remember something new (2006: 144).

Then, he compares Moosa to the protagonist and storyteller of the *Arabian Nights* for trying to put up a brave face in a critical situation, that is to say the visit of the Revolutionary Committee men searching for Faraj. While Najwa, overwhelmed by fear, hides in the bathroom, Moosa entertains and distracts their “guests” from searching the house:

Moosa’s keys shook more furiously now as he carried the tray back to the reception. It must have been very heavy, laden with food, like one of those trays King Shahryar dipped into as he lay listening with lazy eyes to a secretly trembling Scheherazade mill finer and finer the thread of her tales to last a thousand and one nights. [...] She, I am certain now, was one of the bravest people that had ever lived. It’s one thing not to fear death, another to sing under its sword (Matar, 2006: 66-7).

Najwa lives “under the sword” of the regime as well; the Revolutionary Committee men keep an eye on her family and they even try to intimidate her while she is driving home from the market (Matar, 2006: 7). She knows that the dictatorship might take her husband and her son, who are all she has learnt to live for. Then, there is another sword hanging on her head: her marriage, forced upon her with all the responsibilities it entails. Thus, she tries to put on a brave face and be strong, but she is very young and she feels so much under pressure that the “swords” above her head might kill her.

Suleiman often dreams of saving his mother from her “illness”. Listening to the pieces of his mother’s story night after night, he links the origin of her misery to the so dreaded “black day”; thus, all he wishes to do is bring her back to when she was a young, unmarried girl and

rescue her from a prison-like arranged marriage by letting her love the boy she was dating then. Suleiman is aware of his powerlessness in the real world of adults, and he imagines being a hero, a charming prince or a cowboy who takes her abroad, in a place far from the madness of their country:

In my fantasy I would tap on the window of the room where she was held captive and help her jump out. We would run away somewhere where no one could find us. [...] And one day she would meet that boy she was with in the Italian Coffee House [...] and fall in love with him again. [...] And [then] it would be time for me to be born. My imagination turned the tale in my head [...] until [the] warm glow of hope spread itself within me (Matar, 2006: 174-5).

All Suleiman wishes to recover is his mother's light-heartedness and cheerfulness, before she was thrust 'over the border [of innocence] and into womanhood, then irrevocably into motherhood' (Matar, 2006: 123). Only in hindsight, when thinking back of his childhood in Libya, Suleiman understands that he has never blamed his father for his mother's "illness" because he identifies with him. While his father was 'the man who was her punishment', he is 'the boy who sealed her fate' (ibid.: 144); thus, Faraj and Suleiman represent the two roles that were imposed to Najwa, that of the wife and that of the mother respectively, that she has learnt to accept and to love in her own way.

In fact, Suleiman is the son she never wanted; before marrying, she had swallowed many of those pills that prevent women from having children, hoping that her future husband would have repudiated her. Now he is everything to her, her saviour and the repository of her secret illness, as she confesses to him during one of her breakdowns:

'You are my prince. One day you'll be a man and take me away on your white horse. [...] And I almost didn't ...You are my miracle. The pills and the other ways in which I tried to resist. I

didn't know you were going to be so beautiful, fill my heart...'
(Matar, 2006: 12).

As to her role as a wife, her domestic duties seem to provide her a source of stability, something that keeps her mind occupied and is to her a sort of retaliation against the reality of her marriage. Thus, when Faraj was at home it was not conjugal love that got her back to "normal"; 'it wasn't happiness that came over her then but something like confidence: she moved faster and sounded more self-assured' (Matar, 2006: 124). In addition, it is so important to her to do her duty properly, that whenever her husband asks why lunch is not ready yet, she seems to lose all her composure and mutters justifications to herself, knowing that Faraj cannot hear her words, as if there was no point in excusing herself (Matar, 2006: 102).

In the end, Najwa is so busy with the duties connected to 'the marriage she had resisted and now could not live without' (Matar, 2006: 238) that she has learnt 'to go without [love], accepting -always accepting - a life forced upon her' (Matar, 2006: 86). The only kind of love she feels is that of a mother towards her son; as to romantic love, she accepts that she left it in the Italian Coffee when she was fourteen, and after her marriage, she experiences love and the torments associated with it only vicariously by watching Egyptian romance films. Suleiman's words prove that love binds him inextricably to his mother against all odds:

Although her unpredictability and her urgent stories tormented me, my vigil and what I then could only explain as her illness bound us into an intimacy that has since occupied the innermost memory I have of love. If love starts somewhere, if it is a hidden force that is brought out by a person, like light off a mirror, for me that person was her. There was anger, there was pity, even the dark warm embrace of hate, but always love and always the joy that surrounds the beginning of love (Matar, 2006: 21).

To conclude, the mother figure that emerges from this novel is that of a fragile woman who struggles to be the glue of a family in which the father figure, who is one of the targets of the regime, is frequently absent. She has to come to terms with a life she has not chosen for herself but was forced upon her by a family devoted to tradition; however, the love for her son guides her through the darkness of her days and re-unites them at the end of the novel.

2.2 *Anatomy of a Disappearance*: four women, one mother, many questions

In *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, four women play an important role for Nuri, the twelve-year-old protagonist and narrator: the woman he grew up calling Mother, the young stepmother Mona, the housemaid Naima and his father's lover Béatrice Benameur.

Firstly, the Mother, whose name is never revealed in the novel, died when Nuri was ten; she continues to live on in his thoughts and he misses her more than ever when his father is kidnapped, as he feels dispossessed of both the reference points and pillars of his family (Matar, 2011: 139). She died shortly after having been rushed to the hospital and the causes of her death are not specified; the only explanation Nuri was given was that nothing could save her (ibid.: 43).

The overall picture of the Mother that emerges from the novel is that of a fragile woman who seemed to conceal a secret unhappiness and to be in a world of her own. Even if she lived with her family in a hot and sunny place like Egypt, she did not love the heat and preferred to go on holiday in cold places such as the Swiss Alps and Norway, where she stayed with her family in an isolated wooden cabin in the middle of nature. Even if her husband would have preferred to spend the holidays laying in the sun all day, he let his wife plan their vacation; and she would always opt for lonesome cold places where she felt she could be herself. Her peculiar behaviour, however, raised many questions in Nuri:

Was it the romance of wood fires, the discretion of heavy coats, that attracted my mother to the north and unpeopled places of Europe? Or was it the impeccable stillness of a fortnight spent mostly sheltered indoors with the only two people she could lay claim to? I have come to think of those holidays [...] as having taken place in a single country – her

country – and the silences that marked them her melancholy. There were moments when her unhappiness seemed as elemental as clear water’ (Matar, 2011: 7).

Her love for these mountainous regions is connected to an attraction for sublime landscapes, which evoke emotions so strong that people stiffen ‘at the sight of deep, hollow chasms emptied out of the rocky earth’ (Matar, 2011: 5). In fact, as Kamal tells Nuri during a visit to the National Gallery in London, Mother’s favourite painter was Turner; she was fascinated by

the frothing, unbrushed curls of the waves, the peopled and tilting ships, the pregnant sails, clouds gathering like vultures, the chill of the whole thing (Matar, 2011: 77).

Moreover, Mother was a very silent and reserved person; sudden loud noises upset her and she was careful not to make any; sometimes she seemed to live a life on her own, detached from the rest of the family, as if she got lost in ‘the clearings where she stood alone, not knowing how to return’. At those times, her sadness pushed her in such a remote place that she was unattainable and did not even seem to recognise Nuri, looking at him as if he were not her son; and in her last year, she was so depressed she did not even feel like leaving her room. Nuri ‘never stopped to ask [Mother’s unhappiness] true cause [even if] nothing is more acceptable than that which we are born into’ (Matar, 2011: 32-3). A part of him continues blaming his father and his frequent absences for Mother’s sudden passing (Matar, 2011: 27), but there are still so many unanswered questions around his family that it will take him years before knowing the truth.

The Mother was quite a secretive character and some of her behaviours were a mystery to Nuri, such as when on holiday she ‘would occasionally glance at the fourth empty chair as if it signalled an absence, something lost’. (Matar, 2011: 6) Or, when she told Nuri about how he came to be born in Paris, she always started with the story of how Naima started to work

for their family, and he could not understand why (Matar, 2011: 57). In the same way, he could not figure out why his Mother looked different on the photographs taken after he was born, as if his birth had cast a shadow on her (Matar, 2011: 35).

Notwithstanding Mother's peculiar and unstable behaviour, she was a source of solace for Nuri, who looked forward to one of her comforting night visits (Matar, 2011: 5) and was lulled by the 'the steady rhythm of her breath, the turning pages of her book' (Matar, 2011: 31) whenever he rested his head on her hip while she was reading.

However, two years after Mother's death, while on holiday in Alexandria's Agamy Beach, Nuri and his father Kamal met a young Arabic-English woman, Mona, who would later become his stepmother. From the day of their first encounter, Nuri is caught in a sort of oedipal complex and puts himself into an imaginary competition with his father to win Mona's love (Matar, 2011: 3); he is twelve years old and he is discovering adolescence and all the drives and instinctual desires connected with it. In fact, throughout the novel, Nuri always refers to the young woman simply as 'Mona' and not as his 'stepmother'. However, the attachment to Mona can also be interpreted as his need for a maternal figure, the same way as the early loss of her father 'had partly attracted Mona to [his] father, an Arab man fifteen years her senior' (Matar, 2011: 23).

Nuri is almost obsessed with Mona, and throughout the novel, he describes her in a very detailed way; in particular, he pays a lot of attention to her anatomy, the way she moves and her body reacts in different situations. From the first time he saw her at the hotel in Alessandria, he almost felt a carnal desire for her, as he 'wanted to wear her as you would a piece of clothing, to fold into her ribs, be a stone in her mouth. [...] How wonderful it would have been drinking something intended for her' (Matar, 2011: 12-3).

Mona is 'more comfortable in the world than Mother had ever been' (Matar, 2011: 66); she can be considered her foil, and the freshness connected to her youth makes Kamal's first wife look even more dull and unhappy. To give an idea of this opposition, Nuri compares Mona's 'outrageously bright yellow swimsuit [to] the yellow hospital bracelet that had been bound round [his] mother's wrist' (Matar, 2011: 10).

When he finds out about his father's abduction, he is with Mona, and, from that moment, she becomes his reference point, until when he is sent to school in London. However, by

growing up and becoming adult, Nuri progressively moves away from Mona and loses all his interest in her; as his teenage infatuation fades away, he decides to concentrate his energies on the search for the truth about his father's kidnapping.

His search will lead him to a third woman, Béatrice Benameur, their family lawyer's cousin and his father's lover; by talking to them, Nuri discovers that his father had lovers and that he had a second life together with Béatrice in Geneva. Moreover, she reveals Nuri the truth about Kamal's decision to marry Mona: 'She must know that your father married her because of you. [...] At first he thought Mona might be good for you because he saw how fond you both were of each other' (Matar, 2011: 222).

After his conversation with Béatrice, Nuri decides to tell Mona about his father's lover; in the heat of the moment, Mona hints at a truth that has always been hidden from her stepson:

'What does Naima have to do with any of this?'

'Oh, please, don't tell me you never suspected it. I mean, you must have looked at yourself in the mirror and wondered... I mean, look at the colour of your skin, for God's sake. And how she always fussed over you' (Matar, 2011: 224).

After such a revelation, Nuri tries to convince himself that his skin is darker than that of his parents because he resembles his great-grandfather; but truth is inescapable and it is so hard to swallow that it makes Nuri feel sick (Matar, 2011: 226). By looking back after his stepmother's words, the adult Nuri realises that all those mysteries and unanswered questions around Mother, Naima and the circumstances of his birth in Paris are like small pieces of a puzzle fitting together, providing him with new certainties as well as new doubts concerning his own identity.

Now, at the light of this revelation, Nuri can understand why Mother, whenever she told him about how he came to be born in Paris, started by recollecting the day they hired Naima in Cairo and brought her to France on boat. Moreover, he is able to figure out why Taleb, his father's 'Parisian' friend, tells Nuri that the trip on boat had made Naima so sick that Mother insisted on rushing to Paris; or why, when asked about the circumstances of his mother's

death, he was vague and insisted on Mother's humanity, a term he could not even entirely grasp (ibid.: 57-61).

In addition, Nuri recalls how Naima was always cautious when his father was around as if she was afraid of upsetting or disturbing him; as if there was a secret being shared between them and that should not be disclosed to Nuri. In particular, he recalls a conversation in the car with his father while going to the hospital to see Mother; on that occasion, Naima, seeing young orphans run through the cars, alluded to her young age when she had started working (Matar, 2011: 41).

Considered this, and remembering how much Naima has always been present and caring with him, and how many times she took on the role of the mother and comforted him, especially when he was ill (Matar, 2011: 225), Nuri recognises that there is an undeniable bond connecting him to Naima. At the end of the novel, the adult Nuri, after having talked to Béatrice and having severed his connections with Mona, decides to go back to Cairo, because

‘everything [he] loved and all of what was lost was once [there]. And now [he] was arriving into absence, after everyone had gone, [but] deeper into the city, the streets tangled. [...] The swollen pavements, the chocked lanes unnerve[d] [him]. It was as if, in the eleven years [he] had been gone, a terrible truth had disquieted the city of [his] childhood’ (Matar, 2011: 227-8).

Nuri's real relationship to Naima is never mentioned explicitly in the book; to be more precise, Nuri acknowledges it towards the end of the novel (Matar, 2011: 237), but he does it so absent-mindedly that he gives the impression not to really want to think about it. In the end, the reader, who has been following the same path, made of hints and half-truths as Nuri, seems not to be given a satisfactory answer, as if it had to remain a secret. Thus, there is a sort of unspoken pact between the reader and the author that recalls that between Nuri and Naima about their mother-son relationship: both sides are aware of the truth, but they

do not dare speaking about it openly, believing it more appropriate not to alter the state of things.

In fact, when Nuri goes back to the Cairo flat where he spent his childhood, and where he finds Naima still waiting for him, he realises that it is better to leave things as they are, to keep for himself the bond existing between them and not to dig into the past, as it would be unbearable for both of them to descend into painful details. As Nuri says at the end of the novel,

When [...] Naima and I were alone, the silences assumed a new quality. Every time she finished asking if I wanted tea or coffee [...] and after every reply I made, it seemed that we were each slowly returning to the chain of our private thoughts. What I knew – and preferred that I did not know – could not be uttered. It was impossible to change our shared history, to be mother and son in the clear light of day. And this was not a hindrance, this impossibility – more a mercy (Matar, 2011: 237).

2.3 Fawzia Tarbah: a radical force in Hisham's life

Hisham's mother is very different from Suleiman's mother Najwa or from the mother figures appearing in *Anatomy of a Disappearance*. In Matar's first two books, mothers are usually very fragile characters who can neither leave past sufferings behind nor cope with the difficulties brought on by the revolution and the prominent roles played by their husbands in it. As a result, they frequently lose their nerve and are unable to provide stability to their families, and, in particular, to their sons; the weight of the revolution is so heavy that they gradually collapse under it.

On the contrary, Hisham's mother Fawzia is the driving force of the family; as the future is uncertain and it is painful to look back at the past, she focuses on the present. In fact, during their forced exile to Cairo, a city she loves and considered a cultural capital, she is very active

and busy with her cooking; she behaves as if nothing can stop her from doing what she likes to do and from taking care of her loved ones. As Hisham writes,

In those days my mother operated as if the world were going to remain forever. And I suppose that is what we want from our mothers: to maintain the world – and, even if it is a lie, to proceed as though the world could be maintained. Whereas my father was obsessed with the past and the future, with returning to and remaking Libya, my mother was devoted to the present. For this reason, she was the truly radical force in my adolescence (Matar, 2016: 63).

For instance, Fawzia's dedication to the organisation of 'those epic dinner parties [they] used to host at [their] Cairo flat' (Matar, 2016: 59) was one of the activities into which she directed all her energies. She put such great effort in it and paid so much attention to every detail that it became a real teamwork involving also children, servants and friends. In addition, the choice and the purchase of the ingredients needed was an even more delicate operation that Fawzia both managed and carried out 'with the authority of an artist in the service of a higher cause' (Matar, 2016: 60).

The mother is such a talented and passionate cook that her dishes have the power to silence guests. 'These high dinners were [her] retaliation against [the] reality [of the revolution]. Her obsessiveness [...], combined with her extraordinary talent as a cook, produced astonishing results'. Once, for instance, Jaballa invited a former minister under King Idris for dinner; on that occasion, Fawzia prepared such a tasty soup that their guest, a very talkative person, fell silent and almost moved to tears, as if food had made some distant memories re-emerge (Matar, 2016: 63-4).

However, Fawzia is not only a talented cook and a strong mother trying, together with her sons Hisham and Ziad, 'to make up for the missing pillar, [to sustain] the once balanced structure of four columns [that] was now in perpetual strain' (Matar, 2016: 70). She is also a woman endowed with great humanity, sense of solidarity and humility; in fact, during the

revolution, she was part of an underground net providing support to women whose husbands and/or sons were brought to Abu Salim prison.

As Adly writes in his book, in Libya there were actual subterranean silent nets of social solidarity: those mothers and sons who had lost the head of their family were helped economically by their relatives and their neighbours; or, some generous individuals secretly organised charitable works by collaborating with Mosque Imams. (Adly, 2012: 17) Moreover, many women whose relatives were imprisoned in Abu Salim were involved in a silent net of female solidarity; the main purpose of the groups forming this net was that of supporting mothers and wives who ended up alone, or with children to care for, at the mercy of their own grief. Thus, to prevent them from going mad, they kept each other busy with various activities, such as preparing food and clothes to bring to Abu Salim prisoners.

The following words are those pronounced by a man participating in the literary event organised for Hisham's return; he takes the opportunity to praise Fawzia for her solidarity under the regime. The name of this man is not revealed, as if the author wanted to set him up as the symbol of all the students and opponents of the regime who were imprisoned; to thank Fawzia. He reports what his mother had told him when she was alive:

My mother – I'm her only child – was losing her mind. She asked who she could stay with in Tripoli and people told her of a woman who put up mothers of political prisoners. She was known for having an open house to these mothers who travelled the distance to visit their children. [...] And this woman, my mother told me, thought of a thousand tricks to distract my mother. Every week the two women cooked for the entire prison wing; [...] they sent us platefuls of the finest food. They sent books, pens and writing pads. The guards stole much, but much also reached us, and what reached us was enough (Matar, 2016: 138).

After the event, when talking privately with Hisham at the hotel, Fawzia declares not to remember how many times she has helped the mothers of prisoners, as 'it all seems so long ago. Another life' (Matar, 2016: 139). This statement contains both all of her humility and the sorrow characterising those years, which she seems to be willing to forget, as if going over those events again was too much to bear.

When it comes to losing or being separated from a member of the family, it is very easy to go mad with grief. In fact, when Hisham's cousin Izzo was shot dead by a sniper during a battle in Zliten, Aunt Zaynab was on the verge of despair; and the situation worsened when she discovered that her other son Hamed, who had fought next to Izzo in Zliten, had decided to continue fighting by joining the resistance in Syria (Matar, 2016: 102).

Moreover, the cruelty and disrespect shown by Gaddafi's men towards the bodies of the buried protesters blurs the borders of sanity. This is the case of an old man in Zliten Hisham contacted in 2011 to have news about the state of things in Libya; while the dictator's men were '[digging] up the graves and [burning] the bodies', this man was happy because his son was at home. However, the son was not alive; he was dead and rotting in his own bedroom, waiting for his father to grant him a decent and undisturbed burial (Matar, 2016: 95-6).

2.4 Searching for stability: the final domestic scenes in Matar's books

Matar's books share many thematic and stylistic features, and their characters follow similar paths; Libyan contemporary and past history intertwine with the events of three families coming to terms with Gaddafi's dictatorial regime. Fathers are mostly absent, mothers struggle to hold together the pieces of disrupted families and, consequently, sons suffer from a lack of stability in their lives, due not only to the fragmentation of the family but also to the forced exile that brings them away from relatives, friends and the reference points and places of their childhood.

The need for the stability and comfort provided by the family and the domestic spaces of the childhood home can be found throughout Matar's works. However, they are particularly evident in the closing scenes of the books, in which the three protagonists/narrators are finally reunited with their dearest relations and the domestic spaces where they were raised.

In the last chapters of *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, Nuri is a 24-year-old boy who has just earned a PhD in art history and is free to shape his own future; however, he is restless, and the presence of Mona in London upsets him and makes him feel nervous. Thus, he decides to go back to Egypt, the country where he was raised, where the happy memories of his childhood are safe, where he hopes to be able to retrace his steps and find some kind of stability for himself. After a short stay at the Magda Marina hotel where he used to go on holiday with his father and Mona, he

Began to long to get back to the Cairo apartment, to see Naima again. When the day came for [him] to return [he] felt sharply nervous. By the time the taxi entered the thick traffic of the city the nervousness turned to excitement. I found the flat clean, both the beds made, and was hit by the smell of the food I used to eat as a child (Matar, 2011: 235).

For Naima, as for Hisham's mother Fawzia, the preparation of food is important, because it represents a way of taking care of their loved ones and of showing them all her love. In fact, since Nuri's return, she is always busy cooking his favourite dishes; she prepares real feasts for Nuri, 'she labour[s] over each meal, cooking enough to feed a family [...]; 'the more mouths you feed, the more blessed your home will be', she would say' (Matar, 2011: 238).

Nuri's return to the Cairo flat is a way of searching for refuge in the familiar domestic spaces where he left all his certainties and his dearest memories; in fact, once back, he takes his father's room, where he could still find all his clothes, and sleeps in his bed, as Naima had assumed, and his father's study becomes his refuge (Matar, 2011: 238).

The closing scene of this novel is very touching in its simplicity. One evening, Nuri tries on the clothes belonging to his father and that Naima carefully folded before his arrival. To be more precise, he 'finds himself' taking out those clothes, as if he did it unconsciously, as if he were guided by his father. By grabbing one of the suits from his father's wardrobe, he realises how many years have passed from the last time he saw him. As well as the suit has

shrunk and ruined over the years, so Nuri has grown up and many of his certainties and reference points have crumbled to pieces or disappeared:

I never knew clothes could shrink so much from lack of wear. The suit might have fitted the fourteen-year-old boy I was when I last saw my father, when my head barely reached his shoulder. [...] The underclothes, once as white as salt, [...] were now stained unevenly tobacco-brown. The elastic that once held his waist was [...] as hard as dried meat (Matar, 2011: 245).

However, the novel ends on a note of hope. While Nuri goes on trying his father's clothes on, he thinks that maybe, by wearing them often, they can go back to their original shape and still fit his father. Thus, the hope that Kamal might reappear and return home is still alive in Nuri, who puts his father's few belongings back into the pockets of the raincoat where he finds them, as if wishing to leave everything in order for the day his father will be back and bring order and stability with him (Matar, 2011: 245-6).

Moreover, the father's suit Nuri puts on reminds of the ill-fitting black suit that Hisham wears for his return trip to Libya (Matar, 2016: 26). This piece of clothing, which is usually associated with confident businessmen and diplomats, might stand for the protagonist's need to boost his own confidence and his ultimate wish to be reunited with his father, ideally symbolised by the suit.

As to *The Return*, the domestic scene that closes the book is set at Aunt Zaynab and Uncle Mahmoud's house, during 'that afternoon hour [...] when a Libyan house is neither asleep nor fully awake, [...] when the entire street, indeed the world seems vacant' (Matar, 2016: 275). It is in this afternoon that Uncle Mahmoud and Hmad tell Hisham about the poems they wrote or learned by heart respectively over the years spent in Abu Salim. The atmosphere is quite relaxed and almost sleepy, and Hisham, after having taken a restless nap in his dead cousin's bed, watches with amazement his aunt cooking doughs and helps bringing food to the patio. However, not even the tranquillity of such a scene can soothe

Hisham's restlessness connected to the loss of his father; in fact, he cannot get out of his head Telemachus' words about his desire to be able to see his father Odysseus grow old in their own house next to him:

[Those words] were now just as much about Odysseus as they were about Telemachus; just as much about the father as they were about the son; just as much about the wish of the son to have his father spend the remainder of his days in the comfort and dignity of his own house as they were about the son's wish to finally be able to leave the father at home, to finally turn and face forward and walk into the world (Matar, 2016: 273-4).

In the Country of Men, instead, does not exactly end with a domestic scene set in a familiar place where the protagonist feels at home. On the contrary, Suleiman is in Egypt, a country where he was sent as a child by his parents to protect him from the impositions of the regime, and where he is unable to settle in over the years.

The closing scene of this novel, however, can be analysed together with the final scenes of the other two books, as it is about family and, namely, the reunion of a mother and a son. In a highly emotional scene, Um Suleiman and her son meet after fifteen years spent away from each other; now that he is 24 and thinking about the past, Suleiman seems to forgive his mother for all her breakdowns and the responsibilities she gave him when he was only a child:

In the end all that remains are numbers, the measurement of distances, the quantity of things. [...] The mother who tried to never have me, the mother who never chose it, the mother who resisted in all the ways she knew how. [...] When I reach her she kisses my hands, my forehead, my cheeks, combs my hair with her fingers, straightens my collar (Matar, 2006: 245).

To conclude, mothers, even in their daily struggle to cope with the instability caused by the absence of a father figure, never cease to be a point of reference for their sons, who need that kind of reassurance that only mothers can provide. The domestic familiar space is the space with which mothers identify, and it represents a sort of 'refuge' where, in the end, the protagonists of the books look for comfort; they feel their lives lack in stability, as they have been separated from their native country and from their loved ones for a long time.

Chapter 3

Thematic features

In the Country of Men, *Anatomy of a Disappearance* and *The Return* do not only represent realistic portraits of how the violence of Gaddafi's dictatorship affected Libya and, more closely, how three different but similar families try to cope with it; each book also projects a world where there is space for meditation on life and history and where, despite all the suffering, there is still space for hope and forgiveness.

Matar's books are mainly characterised by meditative and descriptive passages, recollections of particularly significant memories by the protagonists, stories, and artistic epiphanies. In addition, plots are not intricate; the description of life conditions under the regime inexorably intersects with domestic scenes and with the emotive landscapes of human experience, giving thus more space to reflection than to action.

The prose is clear, short sentences and coordination prevail on subordination, inviting the reader to pause and meditate on the text. The overall tone is very calm and words are thoroughly picked and measured; however, especially in *The Return*, which is a 'text of carefully controlled rage [...], periodically, the sombre and somewhat decorous surface of Matar's prose is ripped open by a brutal acknowledgement of anger and unappeased longing' (Creswell, 2016: 3).

The first time Hisham explicitly expresses his rage in *The Return* is after having talked to the old man keeping the body of his dead son 'safe' in his room; the author's indignation towards the profanation of the protesters' corpses in Zliten by Gaddafi's men is so deep that the rhythm of the narration suddenly quickens. In fact, Hisham describes a series of actions that he carries out in rapid succession, as if trying to shake negativity off and get the image of the young man's corpse out of his head:

I could not write down the account or share it [...]. I went to the kitchen. I put on the kettle. I looked at the floor tiles and tried to imagine the possibility of breaking them with the hammer that was in the bottom drawer. I was sure the

hammer was there. It is not unusual to keep a hammer in the kitchen, I thought. Perhaps the old man too had one in his kitchen drawer. I pictured him hacking away at the masonry until he reached the earth (Matar, 2016: 96).

However, Hisham's rage and frustration for not being able to find out more about what happened to his father hover throughout the book, and he makes an effort 'to keep the fire at bay' (Matar, 2016: 237), especially when he is profoundly disappointed by those who should help him in his search, such as Gaddafi's son Seif-el-Islam.

Sometimes hatred, rage and anger can be so overwhelming that the only desire is that of being 'swept away [...], to descend into the depths and be lost forever, taken' (Matar, 2016: 246). This happens to Hisham, who thinks of suicide twelve years after his father's abduction, unable to repress the pain caused by this loss and the tears 'that had been building up for so long that their place was no longer in the eyes so much as in the belly' (Matar, 2016: 243).

Moreover, other characteristic features that distinguish Matar's books are the presence of landscapes descriptions, the presence of the sea as having a healing power, the attention to physical imagery, semantic fields of opposition such as light/dark and silence/sound. In addition, literature and art play a major role in Matar's life and represent spaces where he can find consolation and the projection of his own nightmares.

All these elements contribute to giving Matar's books a peculiar lyrical value; in addition, Matar's pages can be compared to the brushstrokes of a painting, as his words have a material quality (Nadotti, 2017: 4). In fact, that they recreate spaces and landscapes, both natural and emotional, lights and shades where the author can find his way by listening to his father's admonishment to work and survive.

Moreover, Matar's books are pervaded by a sense of lingering hope – the hope that the father comes back home, that the state of things in Libya will improve, that questions will be answered and that the truth will surface. In addition, the three books all end on a note of hope, as the protagonists try to go on with life, to accept the past and the challenges that life has placed in their paths, and look forward to the future with optimism.

3.1 The sea: a great motherly womb

The sea represents an essential element in Matar's writing; it recurs very frequently in the articles in which he writes about himself, and it is an ever-present feature in his books. The sea is comparable to a thread that connects the author with the main protagonists of his two novels; in fact, Hisham, Nuri and Suleiman all go to the sea when they feel lost and in doubt, as if its waters were there waiting to lull them as mothers do. In their search for consolation from the harshness of life, the sea represents a free space where they can think freely, as if that great expanse of water was a safe zone, a great motherly womb providing comfort. In particular, they do not turn towards any sea, but their childhood sea, that of the Mediterranean coast, as if to rediscover the bond with their native country.

In particular, Hisham has a very special relationship with the sea; as he writes in an article for *The Guardian*, no matter how far from the coast he ventures, the sea is his territory, a space where he feels perfectly at ease and all his fears disappear.

I could swim further out into the sea than anyone dared, so far out, in fact, that the water became a different territory, icy, its surface the rough grain of stone and the depths, when I opened my eyes underwater, the black-blue of a bruise. [...] I would remain there alone and let the sea's conversation, rising and falling in gentle waves, carry me with it. Even though [...] there was no one to see me, I would dare myself even further: I would close my eyes and spin around myself until I lost direction. I would make a guess and begin swimming back where I thought the shore might be. Somehow, I never got it wrong. Not once (Matar, 2016: 2).

For Hisham, the sea is also the silent witness and the custodian of the relationship with his father; in fact, it was Jaballa who taught Hisham how to swim, 'holding [him] up, one open hand against [his] belly' (Matar, 2016: 37). However, when his father disappeared, he started to fear the sea, as if waters could suddenly swallow him up and push him to the bottom. Just

like he misses the encouraging touch of his father's hand on his shoulder every day, so he misses that very same hand supporting and protecting him not only while learning to swim, but accompanying Hisham every time he plunges into the sea.

In the '70s, Hisham was still living in Libya with his family and they moved from central Tripoli to the most western part of the capital; in those years, the regime was particularly hard on its opponents and Revolutionary Committees were established to search for and execute them in the cruellest ways. In that period, Hisham and his brother Ziad 'went to school, returned just in time for piano lessons, had lunch, then, were off to El-Medina el-Seyahiya club for swimming' (Matar, 2016: 36). Their parents tried to keep their sons' minds occupied as much as possible, to protect them from the madness spreading in Libya, in the same way that Fawzia did with many women whose relatives were in prison.

Then, Hisham and Ziad used to spend all their free time by the sea, a space that seemed to belonged to them only, a safe place where no one and nothing could reach nor harm them:

The sea was our territory. There were a few adults around, but they were so eccentric that they seemed part of our imagination. There was an old man with milky eyes who sat all day by the harbour, fishing. None of us ever saw him catch anything. Then there was El-Hindi, a Native American who had somehow ended up in Tripoli (Matar, 2016: 36-7).

Thus, the sea represents a space where everyone can find some sort of shelter: children can isolate themselves from the madness unravelling in the world; individuals like the old man or the Native American can search for some kind of solace from their troubled lives. Moreover, from the possibility of feeling 'free' offered by this space comes Hisham's 'childhood conviction that the Libyan sea was an open door' (Matar, 2016: 125), as if its vastness and depth enticed individuals to go further and deeper in their discovery of the world and, consequently, of the self.

Hisham's bond with the sea was sealed in his childhood and never fades nor abandons him; in fact, the strength of this bond re-emerges when he first glimpses the land and the sea of his native country during his trip back to Libya. Even if he tries not to romanticise his homeland as exiles usually do, he cannot but admit that Libya has some particular features that are unmatched anywhere else in the world. Its light, the warm colours of the landscape and especially the sea have a special quality that make them unique; as Hisham writes:

I continued to think of every sea, no matter how beautiful, as an impostor. Now, catching these first glimpses of the country, I thought that, if anything, it was more luminous than I remembered. The fact that it had existed all this time, that it remained as it was all these years, that I was able to recognise it, felt like an exchange , a call and its echo, a mutual expression of recognition (Matar, 2016: 41).

Whenever Hisham needs to think and reflect upon a new situation, he goes to or looks across the sea; for instance, after having talked to his cousin Maher, the first in the family to be arrested for opposing the regime, he feels the need to go to the seafront for a walk. In addition, the sea seems to mirror his mood: 'the waters were massive but unthreatening, waiting, certain' (Matar, 2016: 128), as well as Hisham is waiting and hoping to shed some light on what happened to his father.

Moreover, 'the sea, invisible in the night, murmuring in the background' (Matar, 2016: 111) is also the witness of the protest organised in front of the courthouse of Benghazi, after the lawyer Fathi Terbil is arrested by the regime. Alternatively, when Hisham is in his hotel room thinking about his father's short stories, the sea is there, 'unfolding, drawing itself out into the blackness' (Matar, 2016: 143).

The sea is thus an ever-present and essential element in Hisham's life; it is a great motherly womb providing him comfort and granting him a truce from the world around him. In addition, the sea is for Hisham the repository of many of his childhood memories, from the time spent on the beach with his brother to his father teaching him how to swim.

Hisham's love for the sea and the sensation of freedom connected to vast open spaces probably goes back to his Grandfather Hamed. In fact, in *The Return*, Hisham tells about that time his parents succeeded in convincing Grandfather Hamed to visit them in Tripoli for the first time, as he was extremely reluctant to leave his house in Ajdabiya. At first, Hamed seemed eager to go to Tripoli; however, during his second day in that city, he fell completely silent and, after having packed his bag, he asked to be brought back home, without giving reasons for his sudden change of mind.

Grandfather's silence was particularly unsettling. He seemed to be holding his breath. He sat upright, his back not touching the backrest. As we left the capital and the wide desert plains opened all around us, he sighed and leant back. 'Finally', he said, 'the horizon'. My parents laughed and Grandfather told stories the whole way (Matar, 2016: 147).

Grandfather Hamed probably found the city a claustrophobic space; to feel at ease, he needed to see the landscape open up in front of him, as he did in Ajdabiya, which lied 'in a vast emptiness' (Matar, 2016: 146). In the same way, Hisham needs the open space of the sea to unleash his thoughts and find his own peace whenever life challenges him.

However, there is one specific moment in *The Return*, in which Hisham is so overwhelmed by grief and disappointment that not even the sea can soothe him. After having met the man that allegedly saw Jaballa alive after the 1996 massacre, he does not feel the desire to go to the sea and walk alone by the water; on the contrary, he wants 'the busy downtown. [...] Noise and movement' (Matar, 2016: 241), as if being alone reminded him of the possibility of his father having died in isolation and not with the other prisoners in the massacre.

The sea is a ubiquitous presence also in *In the Country of Men*, in which the nine-year-old Suleiman perceives it both as a refuge and as an immeasurable space where the secrets of the adult world surrounding him are enclosed, 'a giant blue monster rising at the edge of the world' (Matar, 2006: 4).

In addition, the sea is an element that seems to connect Suleiman with his parents. In fact, there are a couple of moments in the novel in which Suleiman remembers having looked towards the expanse of the sea with his mother first, and then with his father; both times they are on top of the roof, where Suleiman has a small workshop in which he usually plays and builds small toys. On those two occasions, Suleiman's parents seem to look at the sea as if it had a healing power, as if they wanted to adopt a child's point of view and forget for a moment about life's hardships. When the young boy brought his mother to his workshop on the roof to show her his creation,

she [...] walked to the edge of the roof to look out on to the sea. [...] When I looked up her eyes were fixed and squinting at the light. 'The sea has changed again', she said. 'Every day the sea changes.' Then she was silent. From within my core, a place mysterious until that moment, I felt I was melting, that I, too, like the sun emptying itself into the sea, was pouring myself into her (Matar, 2006: 94).

As to Faraj, some days after his return home, he asked Suleiman to show him his workshop; however, once they were on top of the roof and looked at the sea, the father could find no comfort in it, as his still aching bruises prevented him from seeing well:

We watched the sea. Baba craned his neck. Then I heard his breathing change. 'I can hardly see it', he mumbled. 'The sea is quiet today', I said hoping to distract him. 'A good day for a swimming, Baba. A good day for lying on your back and floating.' [...] Then he turned, and I turned with him, like 'two halves of the same soul, two open pages of the same book'. 'Let's walk under the trees', he said (Matar, 2006: 210-1).

Then, the depths of the sea become a threatening space when Suleiman perceives the 'giant blue monster' (Matar, 2006: 4) as the repository of all the secrets concerning the adults world, that world that is unfathomable to him because of his young age. In fact, when his father is finally back home and the young boy goes for the first time in his parents' room to see him, 'entering the room felt like entering the sea. The only light came in from behind [...] and fell on the floor. [...] The darkness thickened' (ibid.: 200).

Moreover, after his father's disappearance, Suleiman dreams of swimming in the stormy sea and of seeing him floating on the surface; the sea suddenly becomes a threatening space, as he is unable to reach his father nor to see the shore (Matar, 2006: 84). Gripped by questions and doubts, Suleiman reminds of Hisham when afraid of swimming after his father's disappearance, as if it was the stability provided by the father figure to keep them afloat. Moreover, knowing that the sea is not a comforting place for him, he does not run to the seashore to avoid taking the plane bringing him to Cairo (Matar, 2006: 227).

To conclude, in *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, the protagonist's relationship with the sea changes throughout the novel. While at the beginning Nuri ignores the sea, when his friendship with Mona becomes stronger, they go to play on the beach. At the end of the novel, after having become a man in a foreign country, he goes back to Egypt and rediscovers his 'keenness for the sea' (Matar, 2011: 235) and plunges straight into it.

The novel opens with Nuri on holiday with his father in a hotel in Alexandria's Agamy Beach; even if it is near the sea, he does not consider it and prefers the hotel swimming pool.

Although the sea was near by, we did not swim in it [...] content with the shelter and limited pleasures of the swimming pool. The concrete box structures of the single-storey rooms screened us from the surrounding landscape. You could hear the waves lapping lazily against the shore like a snoring guard dog, but we caught only narrow glimpses of the blueness (Matar, 2011: 4).

Nuri is entering adolescence and is so caught in the turmoil connected to that age that he shows no interest at all in the landscape surrounding him. He is so intent on capturing bodily details and movements with the precision of a camera lens that his thoughts never dwell on nature, as if his life revolved around his young stepmother and how to draw her attention to him.

However, during his holiday in Alexandria, in a couple of episodes he seems to consider the sea a comforting element and a space where he can feel free to express himself. For instance, he goes to the seashore to wash his face, confused and jealous of the relationship between Mona and his father; thus, in need of consolation and motherly advice, he wishes their housemaid Naima were with them (Matar, 2011: 19). In addition, when he starts to spend more time with Mona, they often go swimming in the sea, they build sandcastles, sharing 'their bewilderment at the guests who would not venture beyond the swimming pool' (ibid.: 22), as if that was the space where he could feel closer than ever to his stepmother. The situation changes later on in the novel, when Nuri returns to school in Daleswick after the abduction of his father. His priorities now seem to have changed; he tries to chase his thoughts about Mona away and starts to notice the nature surrounding him, as if this reflected his mood (Matar, 2011: 168; 170). In the end, after his graduation, Nuri decides to go back to Egypt; however, before settling down in the Cairo flat where he grew up, he spends one week in Alexandria, at the same hotel where he used to go on holiday with his father. As if an attempt to retrace his steps and change the past, the first thing he does this time is going straight to the sea:

I unpacked and went immediately to the sea. I swam so far out I could no longer see the land. I floated in the breathing silence. The water was so still and calm that I was not entirely certain which way was back. [...] After a few strokes I looked up and could see the thin sliver of land bobbing in the horizon (Matar, 2011: 234).

Reminding of the way Hisham used to swim when playing on the beach with his brother in *The Return*, at the end of the novel, Nuri seems to be attempting to reconnect with his country and find some comfort after all the difficulties he has been through.

To conclude, the sea represents one of the most frequently encountered themes in literature and one that has fascinated, scared and consoled generations of writers and readers to the point that it has become a cultural topos. However, 'cultural conceptions of the sea' (Klein, 2002: 3) have changed across the centuries and it continually be subject to 'semantic metamorphoses' (ibid.: 3). As Raban points out,

The sea is one of the most 'universal' symbols in literature [...]. It changes in response to shifts of sensibility as dramatically as it does to shifts of wind and the phases of the moon. [...] The sea in literature is not a verifiable object [...]; it is, rather, the supremely liquid and volatile element, shaping itself newly for every writer and every generation (1992: 3).

To get a clearer picture of how ideas about the sea have been changing throughout the different historical periods, it may be useful to compare modern age conceptions with those belonging to a more distant past. In ancient Greece, for instance, the sea was frequently personified and it represented a 'great and hostile power that separated the nations from one another, and lay in wait for the sailors that had the hardihood to tempt it'. However, the conception of the sea as a barrier was gradually overcome with the advancement of civilisation (Greene, 1914: 433-5). Moreover, since the Homeric age, the sea is conceived as an element individuals turn to, searching for comfort. As Greene observes, both Patroclus and Odysseus sat by the sea in particularly difficult moments, as 'for a mind whose imagination is heightened by suffering, it is easy to find in the commotion of the sea a counterpart of its own pain.' Then, this idea about the sea is ahistorical, as also Romanticists listened to 'the human voice of the sea' (1914: 436-7) and writers such as Joseph Conrad as well 'goes to the sea to find himself confronting a disturbed reflection of his own age, personality, and preoccupations'. Then, there are ages in which the sea in itself is relegated

to the background and the focus is on ‘the business of seagoing’ such as in the literature of the English Renaissance, which is ‘crammed with ships, voyages, quadrants, compasses, and nautical slang’ (Raban, 1992: 3). Moreover, the nineteenth-century sea studies focus on sailing and the skills and techniques characterising this profession; as Schmitt points out, ‘their attention centres on that metonymy for, inversion of, and antidote to life on land, the ship’. In addition, as he observes, many Victorian texts are characterised by ‘the absence or the unthinkability of the sea [...] [realising that] most of our analyses of colonialism, trade, migration, and cultural exchange are implicitly land-based.’ (2010: 21)

No matter how ideas about the sea have changed throughout the centuries, its influence on humankind cannot be neglected. As Greene points out,

More than the rocks and the trees, more even than the mountains, it has forced itself upon our imaginations as something peculiarly a part of our life. [...] We have cursed it as a hostile monster, we have prayed to it as a god, we have felt it to be a symbol of our inner life; but whatever our passions may have been, they have always told us that the sea is a presence not to be ignored (1914: 427).

3.2 Physical imagery

The use of physical imagery is a characteristic trait of Matar’s writings. It can be found in detailed bodily descriptions, in the recall of past gestures and words, and in metaphors, to convey their meaning more effectively. Moreover, descriptive passages are so detailed that they involve all the senses, from hearing Jaballa’s voice reciting the alam, to tasting the ripe sweetness of Suleiman’s mulberries, to detecting smells that seem to allow a deeper knowledge of people and places.

In *The Return*, the image that Hisham evokes most frequently is the touch of his father’s hand on his shoulder. This gesture is universally acknowledged as encouraging and instilling a sense of security in sons, who continue to feel their father’s hand in time ‘no matter what

burdens are laid on that shoulder or the number of kisses a lover plants there, [...] the shoulder will remain forever faithful, remembering that good man's hand' (Matar, 2016: 75).

Simply seeing his father's hand in a photograph provokes in Hisham a whirl of emotions mixed to longing that he finds difficult to explain (ibid.: 80). Even if his father is not physically next to him, Hisham can still perceive his presence, especially in those moments in which he most needs his father's guide, such as whenever a raw nerve is hit (ibid.: 127), or when, on the point of committing suicide, listens to his father's old admonishment to work and survive (ibid.: 246). As Hisham writes, 'the body of [his] father is gone, but his place is here and occupied by something that cannot be just called memory. It is alive and current. How could the complexities of being [...] ever have an ending that could be marked by a date on a calendar' (ibid.: 166-7).

However, Hisham does not only continue to sense the touch of his father's hand; he also feels the touch of relatives' hands on his flight back to London, after having attended his brother Ziad's wedding in Cairo. In fact, he had not seen his relatives in thirteen years, and seeing the family reunited after so long, after the great suffering caused by the abduction of some of its members, allows him to restore a connection with the past, which 'like a severed limb, tried to fix itself on to the body of the present'. It feels as if, after all the time spent away from them, Hisham's relatives are crowding to reach for him, to re-establish a connection. However, Hisham is left with old questions unanswered and with 'the shadows of [his] aunts' and cousins' hands, now round [his] wrist, tapping [his] shoulder, through [his] hair, then with a feathery touch brushing [his] ankle' (Matar, 2016: 108-9).

In addition, also the touch of his Grandfather Hamed is still vivid in his thoughts:

I remember him beckoning me over once, gathering his fingers round a troublesome button on my shirt and feeding it through its hole, straightening my collar, and then running a trembling hand over my hair with a strange feathery touch, as though he were barely there (Matar, 2016: 149).

This gesture is particularly significant because, if compared with Grandfather Hamed unbuttoning his own shirt to show Hisham his bullet wound (Matar, 2016: 150), it seems that by straightening his nephew's collar he wants to protect him from the bullets of life.

Hisham makes use of physical imagery also when he describes his family, which seems to him a 'horizontal' one, due to the 'tendency, whenever reading or conversing casually or needing to carefully consider a particular problem, to reach for the nearest pillow'. (ibid.: 149) In particular, his 'maternal aunts and cousins were constantly reaching out and touching one another, as though one of [them] might suddenly disappear'. (ibid.: 108)

To conclude, Hisham longs to know what his father looked like when he was in prison, how the man whose hand he could still feel on his shoulder might have changed after all those years held in captivity. When Hisham meets a former prisoner who exchanged messages with Jaballa and saw him, but only from a distance, his wish to know more is so strong that he 'felt the powerful urge [...] literally to possess his eyes, the eyes with which he had seen [his] father, to pluck them out of the man's skull and insert them into [his]' (Matar, 2016: 174).

As to *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, the use of physical imagery and the attention to bodily details run throughout the novel; in particular, the protagonist pays so much attention to anatomic details, the way people move, gesticulate and react to different situations that he seems to have a camera with which he zooms into the different scenes. In particular, much space is dedicated to the description of the woman he has a crush on, namely his stepmother Mona; as a twelve-year-old boy discovering puberty, Nuri is particularly attracted by her body, and he notices also the slightest movement of her muscles.

Mona's first description is so detailed that it has an almost erotic tinge, and the protagonist can be easily pictured as following Mona's movements with his mouth open, as if he were admiring a goddess by the pool:

Her hair was tied sensibly in a ponytail, and she had on an outrageously bright yellow swimsuit that made her skin look darker. [...] She was pulling her ankle, arching her neck, the ridge of her spine pressing against the yellow strap. [...] She

stood up, slid two fingers beneath the bottom of the swimsuit and stretched the fabric around her buttocks. The pattern of the ceramic tiles was faintly imprinted on the underside of one thigh. [...] I watched her without restraint (Matar, 2011: 10-1).

By looking at the stepmother through Nuri's eyes, the reader can picture the protagonist's feelings and internal turmoil. He does not simply gaze at her, but he studies her anatomy, observes the shape of her neck, 'the curve of her calf, the strong tremor of her thigh, the arc of a buttock' (ibid.: 20).

However, Nuri does not only describe the body of his stepmother. He is an attentive observer and captures the smallest detail in every person he meets, from the slightest twitching of a muscle to the least perceptible change in the look, as if he wanted to have access to the train of the deepest thoughts and to those disquieting truths that adults are reluctant to reveal to a twelve-year-old boy. The passages including the 'anatomy' of the other characters are so detailed that the reader can easily picture Mona, Kamal, Monsieur Hass or Béatrice Bénameur in front of them, as if they were observing a painting, following with the eyes the brushstrokes shaping their traits, their expressions and their moods. For instance, he detects his father's insecurity at the restaurant, even before presenting to him the risks involved by his job:

I watched him from across the restaurant. He seemed a wholly different man from that distance. All the confidence was gone. He was leaning on the table with his elbows, one leg rocking. When I took my place opposite to him again, he looked at me for a while before he spoke. [...] I watched his face: his eyes wide open, anxiety curling his lips. He looked like a child who had just seen a ghost. [...] After we finished our food [...] he seemed to have reached some other place in his thoughts (Matar, 2011: 88-9).

Sometimes Nuri's precision is comparable to 'the meticulousness of a heart surgeon' (Matar, 2011: 147) that his father applied to the drafting of his will. In fact, he is able to capture Mona's fragility by observing that 'her neck, rigid and slim, seemed in danger of snapping' (ibid.: 116), or that 'the veins in her neck bulged with every breath [...]; she held her shoulders tightly together, as if the rest of her body might break loose and collapse to the ground' (ibid.: 130-1). Moreover, when Nuri tells Mona that his father had a lover, her face shows a mixture of rage and fragility, and Nuri studies her features as if he had purposely tried to provoke her reaction:

Her face seemed to collapse. The corners of her mouth twitched, but she said nothing. [...] I did not mind telling her. I almost wanted to see how far I could push her. Then it was as if she was mustering every part of herself to speak. [...] Along with the word of surprise, specks of saliva shot out into the light like fine pieces of broken glass (Matar, 2011: 223-4).

As to the family lawyer who supports Nuri and Mona in their search for Kamal, Monsieur Hass' eyes seem to be the 'door' through which Nuri is able to read his thoughts. In fact, when he is entrusted with the responsibility of bringing Nuri and Mona away from Genève, 'his eyes became alive with a sort of purposeful intelligence. [Nuri] was sure this was how he looked whenever Father entrusted him with an important task' (Matar, 2011: 132-3). However, ten years later, Nuri is unable to find the same confident look in Hass' eyes, which 'had become less certain, more wary. He seemed to have given way to the inevitability of his doubts' (ibid.: 201). However, Kamal seemed to know what he was getting into, as Nuri perceives by observing closely the photograph Béatrice shows him at their meeting:

His arms hang slightly away from his torso, sleeves rolled up. His eyes have a hint of bewilderment. They know. The cheeks, too, know: sunken and a shade darker. And in the shirt pocket

there is the top of a cheap biro. He looks like a schoolteacher.
He looks wary, ready (Matar, 2011: 218).

In *In the Country of Men*, what prevails is Suleiman's attention to odours and smells. However, physical imagery is not completely absent; for instance, as in the other two books, the protagonist is affected by a sense of heaviness weighing on his chest, deriving from the difficult situation his family is facing and especially from the secret about his mother's illness that he has to keep (Matar, 2006: 19).

The fact that Suleiman does not pay particular attention to physical details might be connected to his young age; however, he seems to connect different situations and moments in his life, both pleasant and unpleasant, with particular smells. For instance, he knows with certainty that his mother is 'ill' when he detects the smell of alcohol – her medicine – and of cigarette smoke in the kitchen or in her bedroom (Matar, 2006: 10-1).

Another strong odour that remains with Suleiman long after he has smelled it is that of Sharief, one of the Revolutionary Committee men who kidnapped their neighbour Ustath Rashid. Naively hoping to be of help in the search for his father, he approaches Sharief and talks to him, enticed by his gun, a symbol of power and manhood, by the possibility of being treated as an adult and to be finally given answers:

My head was practically inside the car now, and the smell of old socks and cigarettes made me dizzy. The weight of the stench struck me as a sign of manhood, and so there was some excitement in being so close to it. Perhaps to be a man was to be heavy, I thought. (Matar, 2006: 132)

This smell is very similar to the one left behind by the Revolutionary Committee men who had searched their house some days before: 'the odours of the gathering, the stink of smoke heavy with sweat and old stale breath, breath like breath of fasting men' (Matar, 2006: 66). Another unpleasant odour that strikes Suleiman is that emanating from his father's room,

where 'the stink of death was unbearable', shortly after his return (Matar, 2006: 200). All these unpleasant odours do not belong to Suleiman's age; in fact, they are all connected to adulthood, which, like the odours, are still too heavy for Suleiman to bear.

However, smells are not only connected to unpleasant situations; some smells can also bring us back in time to pleasurable memories we long to live again; in fact, when Suleiman moves to Egypt to live with Judge Yaseen and his family, he misses the home where he grew up:

What I missed most was the smell of our house. Once, but only once, I cried and screamed, throwing things [...]. Judge Yaseen reacted nobly. He simply shut the door to the room he had given me in his house [...]. I buried my face into the sharp lavender smell of the pillow, mourning the familiar: digging my face into her neck, kissing his hand (Matar, 2006: 231).

In *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, where the attention to bodily features is remarkable, the protagonist's focus on smells runs throughout the novel as well, as if it was part of the discovery of the world connected to his age.

Firstly, the lingering smell that never abandons Nuri is that of his father, and it seems that the scent he detects under the strap of the timepiece that once belonged to his father is all that Nuri is left with of him:

That same watch is now wrapped round my wrist, and even today, after all these years, when I press the underside of the leather strap against my nostrils I can detect a whiff of him (Matar, 2011: 2).

Later on in the novel, when he is at the airport boarding a plane directed to London to go back to school after the winter holidays, Nuri can 'smell [his] father: his musky, warm skin.

[He] looked about and, even though he was not there, the smell persisted' (Matar, 2011: 160). At the end of the novel when he is back in Cairo, Nuri finds once again this manly smell in the car that belonged to his family, and 'the familiar smell of the leather made it seem as if the car had been holding on to memory' (Matar, 2011: 241).

As to his stepmother Mona, 'her scent made a place in [his] chest ache' (Matar, 2011: 71); smelling some of her personal belongings such as her pearls and her scarf increased his desire for her. In addition, whenever he detects a new perfume on her, he interprets it as the sign of a forthcoming change, as though the scent emanating from her was connected to the course of the events (Matar, 2011: 164).

Detecting someone's perfume is for Nuri a way of guessing his or her personality; it is like a small taste of his or her inner world. When he runs after Béatrice after having seen her in the café, he is unable to catch any scent, neither the slightest perfume introducing him to what type of woman she might be (Matar, 2011: 196). However, when he decides to meet her to get to know each other, as soon as she opens the front door of her house, he can detect her perfume, as if her personality were now accessible to him (Matar, 2011: 220).

Then, Nuri detects perfumes that remind him of his childhood in Cairo, such as 'the human smell of the old and overpopulated city' (Matar, 2011: 139), making him feel nostalgic and disoriented; or the 'smell of the food [he] used to eat as a child' (ibid.: 235), which hits him when he goes back to the apartment where he grew up.

In *The Return*, smells for Hisham are mostly connected to pleasant memories relating to his native country and moments spent with his family when he was a child. For instance, the first thing that Hisham notices just after getting off the plane is the odour of his native country, a combination of comforting familiar scents that 'were like a blanket you were not aware you needed, but now that it has been placed on your shoulders you are grateful' (Matar, 2016: 42).

Then, the perfume of orange blossom water brings Hisham back of the 'epic dinner parties' his parents used to organise in their Cairo apartment (Matar, 2016: 58). In particular, it reminds him of all the dedication his mother put in the organisation of those events and he misses the unity of his family, even if behind this happiness was perpetually hiding the risk for Jaballa to be searched for by the regime.

3.3 Binary oppositions

In Matar's books, it is possible to identify two dominant semantic fields comprising binary oppositions; the first one opposing light to darkness in a literary chiaroscuro that reminds of the brushstrokes of a painter painting lights and shades to give shape to the subjects of his painting. The second one features voices as opposed to silences, in an alternation of spoken and unspoken truths that inevitably intersects with Libya's history under the regime.

In Matar's books, the entities composing a binary coexist, and it is by virtue of the opposition existing between them that they gain strength. In fact, light is even more blinding and full of meaning thanks to the presence of shadow, which becomes pitch-dark when opposed to light; then, the presence of voices makes silences so deep that they almost become deafening, as well as silences emphasise the importance of the voices breaking it.

In addition, light, shadow, silence and voice can also be thought of as terms 'the value of each results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others [...]; the value of just any term is accordingly determined by its environment' (Saussure, 1915: 113-4). Thus, as units of language are defined in negative terms against what they are not, so the value of light and silence is defined by opposition, respectively, to darkness and sound/voice.

3.3.1 Light and darkness

Matar's books strike for their ability to convey the dramatic force inherent to lights and shades; like the sea, the sun in Libya is such a strong element that it gives to light and darkness a material quality. For instance, recalling the time when he lived in central Tripoli with his family in the 70's, Hisham compares the shadows cast on the ground by the high eucalyptus trees of their garden to 'black claws on the ground' (Matar, 2016: 35); in addition, the light of the sunset flooding the landscape was so bright that it 'stretched long and yet as bright as the skin of a ripe orange' (ibid.: 105).

Then, light is for Hisham an element that never stays the same but changes from place to place, as if every landscape had its own peculiar light. For instance, while in Ajdabiya, the city where Jaballa grew up, light and shade are definite, the region of the Green Mountains leading to the open sea, where Fawzia was born, is characterised by a light that 'move[d] with the leaves and the breeze' (Matar, 2016: 108). Moreover, the two very different regions

where his parents come from, seem to enclose and reflect all the characteristics typical of the two sides of his family. In other words, his paternal family is not very expansive, as it comes from an austere place where 'idle talk is suspect' (ibid.: 108); on the contrary, his maternal family's members are very talkative and think that physical contact is very important to establish a relationship.

Then, the light that strikes Hisham the most is undoubtedly that of Benghazi, the city where his relatives live and that still carries the marks of all the peoples and civilisations that have succeeded each other in this region throughout history. In fact, the light of this city seems to have a special material quality that is unequalled anywhere else:

But there is something else, a material that does not belong to any other culture or period. It is timeless and unique to Benghazi. It is perhaps the most important architectural material there is, more than stone. It is light. The Benghazi light is a material. You can almost feel its weight, the way it falls and holds its subject (Matar, 2016: 123-4).

Apart from the beauty of the Libyan landscape, characterised by bright colours and marked contrasts, in *The Return* shadow is often associated not only with the darkness of prison cells, but also with the willingness of Libyan families to shut up in their houses to protect themselves from the interferences of the regime, whose presence is as pervasive as light. In fact, when Hisham returns to his native country after thirty-three years, he notices that architecture has changed much and it reflects the 'private disquiet' of the Libyan families:

Light is no longer welcome in the houses. It is shut out, like other things that come from outdoors: dust, heat and bad news. Architecture, [...] has turned its back on nature. [...] Now high brick walls keep out the view and windows are almost permanently shuttered. I could not help but read, in this new determination to keep out the sun and the passing gaze, an

inner upheaval, a private disquiet. [...] Lunch was often eaten under a chandelier. All this gave me the impression, [...] that the line separating the interior and exterior here was like one of those transformative boundaries we read about in ancient myths (Matar, 2016: 51-2).

Opening the door and being flooded by light is also a gesture that reminds of the opening of a prison cell door. Such a scene, for instance, is evoked when Uncle Mahmoud is interrupted while telling the story of his imprisonment to Hisham, when 'the door to the garden opened. Light entered as solid as a wall, blackening the three or four figures walking in' (Matar, 2016: 56). In particular, the figures appearing on the doorstep remind of jailers, black shapes against the light flooding into the dark cell.

In the Country of Men opens with the description of the blinding brightness of sunlight in Libya, which 'is everywhere', as if it were a material substance occupying the whole country (Matar, 2006: 1); what really strikes Suleiman as a child is the play of light and shadow that he observes with amazement at the market square:

The ceiling was made with dark strips of fabric. The white blades of light that pierced through the occasional gaps [...] shone still and beautiful on the arches and floor, but darted like sparkles on the heads and down the bodies of passers-by, making the shadows seem much darker than they were. Outside, the square was flooded with sunlight. The ground was almost white with brightness, making the dark shoes and figures crossing it look like things floating above the world (Matar, 2006: 4).

Moreover, for Suleiman the darkness of the night is comparable to the mystery surrounding his questions about the adult world, growing even more unfathomable as the sun goes

down; in fact, during the night, he feels ‘something like a dark liquid from around [the] feet, [...] sending each one sailing alone through their individual night’ (Matar, 2006: 85).

In addition, the scorching power of the sun can be compared to the violence of the regime, and if someone tries to oppose and defy its power, he or she risks hurting himself. Suleiman, who does not take naps during the hottest hours of the day and prefers to play outside, almost faints after a prolonged exposure to sunlight to pick up mulberries from on top of a ladder. Although he recognises ‘how strong the sun is, how mighty, and [feels] frightened by it, by the possibility of it not moving, or coming closer, pressing down against [him] like a giant balloon’ (Matar, 2006: 45), he does not seek shelter and risks that the sun kills him.

The play of light and shadow, the material quality of light and the comparison between the power of sunlight and that of the regime recur also in *Anatomy of a Disappearance*. In this novel, the sun represents an element that divides Nuri’s parents, as his mother does not like the heat, while his father does (Matar, 20011: 4). Moreover, by considering the sun a metaphor for the regime, it can still be viewed as a dividing element, as Kamal dedicates his life to (fighting) it, while his wife fears that he might be killed by it.

Moreover, the darkness wrapping Nuri up just after the news about his father’s abduction reached him, is so thick and odd that it seems that ‘light were an actual solid substance that had poured out of the room’ (Matar, 2011: 127-8); this darkness contrasts with the momentary comfort provided by the sunlight in the Cairo apartment:

A stab of light was piercing through the window. Countless tiny fragments floated in its path. Every day it comes, the sun, newborn and fierce. I thanked God for the morning (Matar, 2011: 152).

However, light and darkness do not only have a material quality in Matar’s books; in fact, their alternating can be interpreted as a metaphor for the protagonists’ search for the truth about their families, on which the regime has cast a shadow.

As Todorov writes in an essay on Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), 'the ample and obvious metaphoric of [...] light and dark is clearly not unrelated to the problem of knowing. In principle [...] darkness is equivalent to ignorance, light to knowledge.' By virtue of this, a parallel can easily be drawn between *The Return* and *Heart of Darkness*, which Todorov defines as a 'narrative of the search for truth' (1978: 251-4). In fact, at the centre of both works lies a journey and, even if they are respectively a return trip to the native country and a discovery voyage, what they have in common is the aspiration to reach some kind of truth or knowledge. While Hisham searches for the truth about what happened to his father, Marlow tries to reach an ivory trader called Kurtz. However, in both cases, truth and knowledge reveal to be surrounded by a darkness that does not allow seeing the light.

'The status of darkness is actually more ambiguous than one might think at first, for it becomes an object of desire' (Todorov, 1978: 254); in fact, both Marlow and Hisham aim to reach the heart of two different types of darkness that enclose the objects of their knowledge. While Marlow has to travel through 'an impenetrable forest' (Conrad, 1899: 41) to reach Kurtz, who lies at the heart of this dark place and embodies darkness himself, Hisham aims to discover the harsh truth that is hidden in the darkness of Abu Salim prison cells. What he needs to reach is the heart of this darkness, namely the 'bottomless abyss' into which his father seems to have disappeared.

In addition, midway between light and darkness, there is the fog. It can be a physical presence, as the fog preventing Marlow's crew from continuing their journey towards the heart of darkness (Conrad, 1899: 41), or it can be a metaphor for the uncertainty taking hold of Hisham whenever he imagines his father's life in prison, 'only able to see into a shallow distance' (Matar, 2016: 69).

In the end, 'the very act of knowing is called into question' (Todorov, 1978: 257) and Marlow's experiences, as well as Hisham's search for the truth, seem to be inconclusive; even if light can seep into the fog and give space to hope (Matar, 2016: 185), 'knowledge is impossible; the heart of darkness is itself obscure' (Todorov, 1978: 257).

3.3.2 Voices and silences

The alternating of voices and silences is another distinctive feature of Matar's books. Silence can represent a personality trait or an attitude hiding unspeakable grief behind it; moreover, it can be a measure imposed by a government to its people in order to conceal the truth. However, voices can counter the hollow created by silence, and represent a bulwark of hope and justice, not only on a personal level but also on a social level.

Firstly, silence is a distinctive trait of Jaballa and Grandfather Hamed's personalities; Jaballa has 'an astonishing ability to sustain social silences', a characteristic he has inherited from his family, which 'is careful to avoid intrusion and gossip.' (Matar, 2016: 65-71) In fact, Grandfather Hamed was 'a man who valued silence' and his love for a 'modest minimalism' (Matar, 2016: 146-9) is also reflected in the structure of his house and in his love for open, empty expanses, which seem to afford him a space for reflecting on life. His silences have a meditative quality, which he had learned to cultivate after having lived long enough to see not only the Ottoman domination in Libya but also part of Gaddafi's dictatorship.

Moreover, silence for Jaballa represents an act of fidelity to his own ideals, as he never reveals the names of those who helped him to make his letters reach his family (Matar, 2016: 180). Letters are the only way for Jaballa's voice to reach his family; however, after the third letter, communication interrupts and his silence opens up an abyss made of doubts and uncertainty.

Silence is also associated with the father figures of *In the Country of Men* and *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, as both Faraj and Kamal do not talk much nor reveal the details relating to their job and their frequent travels. This secrecy triggers innumerable questions that mostly go unanswered; those who mostly ask questions are the young protagonists of the books, who are excluded from the adult world and left with their doubts unresolved.

Then, silence can be a way of reacting to painful situations; sometimes sorrow is so great that it becomes unutterable and individual take refuge in silence. For instance, Jaballa falls completely silent when his parents die; as Hisham notices, losing two of his reference points in life unsettles his father irrevocably:

When my grandmother passed away, Father [...] grew quiet. For several days he became terribly distant, as though grief were a faraway country. When several years later Grandfather Hamed died, my father fell into an even deeper despair. [...] Without saying a word, Father stood up and went to his room. [...] I could hear a howl, as though he were screaming from a long way away (Matar, 2016: 162).

In addition, Hisham himself falls completely silent when his father is kidnapped; just the thought of what might be happening to him and or in which ways they might be torturing him is too much for Hisham to bear. His father's abduction has a strong impact on his life and a shocking effect; in fact, he 'turned into a bridled animal, cautious and quiet. [He] could not stop thinking of the detestable things that were surely happening to [his father] as [he] bathed, as [he] sat down to eat. [He] stopped speaking [and] hardly left his London flat' (Matar, 2016: 69).

In *The Return*, Uncle Mahmoud uses silence to 'protect' himself and those around him from truths that may be too hard to hear; it is as if he had decided to lock some memories of his imprisonment in an unreachable place in his soul, as sometimes the past can be too painful to dig up:

Only in the background, in some secret compartment of his being, did there seem to be a quiet, resolute withdrawal, a shyness not too unlike that of a believer who, once having had his faith challenged, was now resigned to nursing his convictions in secret. At times, in mid-conversation, his thoughts brought him to a sudden silence. [...] Perhaps Uncle Mahmoud had called a truce [...] – one of those silent manoeuvres to veil us from a world of infinite danger (Matar, 2016: 75-6).

Silence can also be imposed by a government to the people, in order to safeguard its own interests; this is what happened to Hisham's family, whom the Egyptian authorities who had abducted Jaballa told neither to campaign nor to make their voices heard, because that would 'complicate the situation' (Matar, 2016: 69). In addition, they made Hisham's family believe that Jaballa was in a secret place in Cairo, while they had consigned him to Gaddafi's men.

When governments and authorities only pursue their own interests, the voices of those who protest or seek the truth are simply ignored, or silenced by promises that eventually reveal to be empty. In 2009, Hisham, supported by journalists, writers and human rights activists, launched a campaign aimed not only to shed light on Jaballa's case, but also to improve human rights in Libya. After the publication of open letters that sparked debates and made Hisham an easy target, he manages to be granted an audience with the House of Lords, first, and then with the minister David Miliband, also hoping to take advantage of the détente between Great Britain and Libya. However, all Hisham can obtain are promises and assurances that get nowhere; thus, he decides to ask for help to Seif-el-Islam, Gaddafi's son (Matar, 2016: 186-197).

Notwithstanding his initial apparent availability to help Hisham in his search, Seif later reveals to be an elusive person and progressively ignores Hisham's cries for help by making their correspondence ever infrequent.

A very similar situation can be found in *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, where inspectors and police officers assure Nuri and his stepmother that they will do all they can to find Kamal's whereabouts (Matar, 2011: 114). However, the competent authorities gradually fall silent, and Nuri, who, in the meantime has become a man, tries to put together the pieces of his father's kidnapping and of his second life with Béatrice, but all he is left with are doubts and the hope that he may come back one day.

One of the strongest weapons to break the silence imposed by the regime is the power of stories, which represent 'an effort against [the] erasure' (Matar, 2016: 75) of its brutality and intimidating measures. Especially in *The Return*, the voices of Hisham's relatives and other former prisoners telling the stories of their imprisonment raise awareness of the true face of the regime. To conclude, Matar is 'writing [...] against that silence' (Matar, 2016: 3); in his

own way, he is trying to break the silence characterising human expression, so as not to forget what has been and make sure it does not repeat again.

3.4 The importance of art

Art, in its different forms, can be a source of reflection and consolation; paintings, literature or music, just to mention some, can represent 'spaces' where time seems to be suspended and individuals can project their own emotions, especially negative ones, hoping to be able to transcend them.

Some paintings play a crucial role in Hisham's life, such as Titian's *The Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence* and Manet's *The Execution of Maximilian*; he is particularly captured by the emotional intensity that the scenes represented on the canvases convey and by the richness of details, which he studies with interest and meticulousness. These two paintings, both representing the dramatic moment before life is taken from the protagonists of the scenes, attract Hisham's attention because they remind him of his father and of what might have happened to him after his abduction. In fact, as Hisham is tormented by the uncertainty deriving from not knowing his father's whereabouts, his attention to pictorial details is comparable to the search for a sign helping him to give a shape to his father's death.

Hisham has always been fascinated by paintings; however, his attitude towards them and the way he visits art galleries has changed over the years. As he explains in *The Return*, the watershed is represented by his father's abduction:

I find certain paintings mysterious. I am drawn to them as I am to certain individuals. I have been interested in art, architecture and music for as long as I can remember, but the fascination with pictures changed when I was nineteen, the year I lost my father. The usually way of going to a gallery, of spending a couple of hours passing from one painting to the next, until one comes to the end, no longer worked. In fact, it overwhelmed me. More than once I thought of screaming (Matar, 2016: 169).

After his father's abduction, Hisham is no longer able to bear too strong emotions coming to him all together or too rapid movements (Matar, 2016: 70); he is so shocked and overwhelmed by the kidnapping that he almost needs to split things into smaller parts and examine them bit by bit. This is exactly what he decides to do when visiting an art gallery: instead of spending hours looking at hundreds of paintings all at once, he decides to pay fifteen-minutes daily visits and to focus on a single painting for as many days as he felt like, by switching to another painting whenever his interest was exhausted. Of course, this is possible when it comes to the National Gallery, as he lives in the nearby and entry is free (Matar, 2016: 169).

The projection of Hisham's grief for his father's loss is particularly evident in the highly lyrical descriptions of Titian's *The Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence* and Manet's *The Execution of Maximilian*. To admire the first one, together with many other Italian masterpieces, Hisham flew specially to Rome from Libya, only a couple of days after his return. He is struck by Titian's mastery in portraying Lawrence's suffering, which is 'impossible to ignore' (Matar, 2016: 168), the details of his body, of those around him and of the bench holding him up on the fire.

There are some elements that Hisham inevitably connects with the suffering his father's abduction; for instance, the 'efficient men' surrounding Lawrence are well coordinated, one stoking the fire, the other holding the victim down, and they remind of the Revolutionary Committee men organising efficient and coordinated kidnappings, as those concerning Hisham's family. Moreover, 'bystanders watching the spectacle' (Matar, 2016: 168-9) remind of the Libyan people watching the dangling corpses of the opponents who were executed and then hanged in public places so as to be seen by as many people as possible (Adly, 2012: 49).

However, 'there is a strange detail: Lawrence's left foot is caught in a peculiar position, dangling off the bench, floating in the flames, as if enjoying the fire' (Matar, 2016: 169). The victim's foot, like a moth, is close to what might kill him, and this detail probably makes Hisham think of his father's commitment to his cause; in fact, even if he was completely aware of the risks he was taking, Jaballa continued his battle against the regime even if achieving his objective might cost him his life.

On the other hand, Manet's *The Execution of Maximilian* is a painting Hisham has a special relationship with, as there is a strange and at the same time inescapable coincidence that ties Hisham to this masterpiece. In fact, as Hisham notices thanks to a diary entry he accidentally rediscovers many years later, he visited the National Gallery on the 29th June 1996, the day of the notorious Abu Salim massacre, and on that day, he switched from Velázquez to Manet's *Maximilian*.

The coincidence is quite disturbing for Hisham, as it is 'unsettlingly appropriate' (Matar, 2016: 182), given that Manet's painting portrays a political execution. The author inevitably recognises his father in the figure of Maximilian, as he does with Lawrence, reinforcing his convictions around his father's death. As it is huge in scale, the painter had to divide it into three large paintings in order to be able to work on it; unfortunately, some parts are missing and, interestingly enough, the figure of Maximilian, apart from his hand, cannot be seen (Matar, 2016: 183). The fact that Maximilian's hand is the only part of his body that appears on the painting today reinforces the coincidence, as it reminds of Jaballa's hand and of the importance and the comfort of its touch for Hisham.

The subject of Manet's painting is trans-historical; it stands for all the controversial and unjustified political events taking place in the world. The episode of *The Execution of Maximilian*, like Abu Salim massacre, is largely undocumented and there are no photographs of it, so 'Manet had to rely on the stories he heard and the accounts he read in the papers' (Matar, 2016: 183) to be able to realise his painting. The realisation of this painting recalls Hisham's effort to put together all the stories he has been told by his relatives in order to come up with a more or less accurate account of his father's kidnapping and subsequent execution. From that day, Hisham's relationship with this painting is controversial, as he feels a connection with it and, at the same time, sees the inescapable truth fixed in paint:

It would be hard to think of a painting that better evokes the inconclusive fate of my father and the men who died in Abu Salim. [...] Today, whenever I see a Manet, the white, his white, which is unlike any other white, cannot be a cloud, a tablecloth or a woman's dress but will always remain the white leather

belts of the firing squad in *The Execution of Maximilian* (Matar, 2016: 183).

As a different painting marks every period of Hisham's life, when the financier Lord Rothschild offered to help him meeting the dictator's son, seeing the possibilities for a breakthrough, he switched to Canaletto's *The Stonemason's Yard* (Matar, 2016: 197). This painting portrays a square temporarily transformed into a workshop to repair a nearby church; Hisham probably sees in this subject the opportunity to build a better Libya that may come up thanks to foreign help.

However, paintings are not the only form of art that provides him some sort of consolation or the strength to transcend his grief and his doubts; in fact, during the organisation of the campaign, poetry was his refuge, but, as with paintings, he could only take it little by little:

For three months I did not write a single sentence. I hardly slept. The only thing I could read was poetry, and only a few lines at a time, and all the while the blood ran hotly in my veins (Matar, 2016: 187).

In addition, paintings and poems might represent a sort of refuge for Hisham because they can provide, with varying intensity, the immediacy of perception he needs to overcome his worries. In Scarry's terms, painting – like film, music, theatre and sculpture, is characterised by an 'actual sensory content' that gets close to 'the vivacity of the visible world, since it is itself a piece of [it]' (2001: 5). On the other hand, poetry not only results in 'delayed perception', but has also an 'immediate sensory content'. In other words, what is important in poetry is not only the mimesis process, but also the disposition of words and lines on the paper, which make 'the material surface of the poem closer to the material surface of [a] painting', together with the sounds produced when reading a poem:

[In poetry], the sequence of printed signs contains a set of instructions for the production of actual sound; the page does not itself sing but exists forever on the verge of song. [Moreover], the visual disposition of the lines and stanzas provides an at once apprehensible visual rhythm that is a prelude to, or rehearsal for, or promise of, the beautiful regulation of sound to come (Scarry, 2001: 7).

To conclude, as for Hisham some paintings have the power to evoke what happened to his father, so the sound of poetry has the power to evoke Jaballa's voice when reciting poetry and open up spaces as vast as the sea and as luminous as hope.

Chapter 4

Exile, displacement and the 'commitment to rootlessness'¹

The term 'exile' refers both to the situation in which someone is forced to live away from the native country and to all those individuals who suffer the consequences of this banishment. Thus, exile is fundamentally 'a discontinuous state of being [that cuts individuals] off from their roots, their land, their past' (Said, 2002: 177) and that brings with it a constant sense of displacement and the incapability truly to adapt to a new country.

As Said points out, 'although it is true that anyone prevented from returning home is an exile, some distinctions can be made among exiles, refugees, expatriates and émigrés'. While the term 'exile' has developed from the old practice of banishment and seems to put the accent on the condition of exclusion, 'solitude and spirituality' an individual experiences, the term 'refugees', according to Said, is 'a creation of the twentieth-century state' and refers to 'large herds of innocent and bewildered people requiring urgent international assistance' (2002: 181).

On the one hand, exiles and refugees seem to be inseparable from the political implications connected to their situation; on the other, 'expatriates' and 'émigrés', live away from their native country and do not return to it following respectively personal and professional reasons. Thus, while 'expatriates may share in the solitude and estrangement of exile, [...] they do not suffer under its rigid proscriptions', and émigrés such as 'colonial officials, missionaries, technical experts [...] may in a sense live in exile, but they have not been banished' (ibid.: 181).

In his attempt to define the notion of 'exile', which is 'a cloudy one', Pavel puts the accent on the idea of 'forced displacement' that it implies. By making a distinction between exiles and other types of 'human mobility across geographic and political space', he highlights the fact that 'exiles never break the psychological link with their point of origin [...], and the exiled faith's in the possibility of homecoming' never dies (1998: 26).

Exile is one of the main themes running through Matar's books as it has deeply affected his own life and that of his family. To be more precise, their situation can be placed as midway between that of the exile and the expatriate, as they are not forced to leave the country by

¹ Matar, 2016: 25

the regime, but they decide to leave it, as they do not deem it a safe place where to live. In addition, differently from expatriates, who 'can go home any time they like' (Suleiman, 1998: 1), they cannot return to Libya as the regime would try to hunt them down. Thus, as Pavel points out,

In modern times, the term [exile] is also applied to those who leave their native land of their own accord, as a precautionary measure against the threat of religious or political persecution ("political" here includes totalitarian persecution in the name of ideology, race, and social class) (1998: 26).

Hisham explores the sense of instability and impermanence connected to exile especially in *The Return*, where he recounts how his family came to leave Libya and the impact this departure had and continues to have on him. In fact, he could not imagine that 'back in 1969, [when] a young captain named Muammar Gaddafi deposed King Idris, [...] many of the significant features of [his] life – where [he] live[s], the language in which [he] write[s] [...] – were set in motion' (Matar, 2016: 4). Then, this theme is refracted in *Anatomy of a Disappearance* and *In the Country of Men*, where the pervasiveness, the pressure and the violence of the regime, which spread a general sense of uneasiness and uncertainty, deeply affect Nuri, Suleiman and their respective families.

4.1 Living under the regime

At first, the coup that saw the accession to power of Muammar Gaddafi was welcomed by the majority of the population and it was regarded as an opportunity to supplant the monarchical regime, which was corrupted and gave few space to political action. However, the promise of a new republican age soon turned out to be, in all respects, an oppressive dictatorial regime. In fact, the new power progressively left no margin for political action nor freedom of thought; in addition, it dragged the country into several wars and terrorist attacks, paying a high price in terms of both financial resources and human lives (Adly, 2012: 42-4).

The majority of the early supporters, after having discovered Gaddafi's real intentions, decided to align with or organise an opposition movement; however, many of them were

killed in one of the innumerable repressive actions carried out by the regime or they went into exile. Moreover, those dissidents who fled Libya to try to start anew were defined as 'stray dogs' who had to be hunt down and killed wherever they were (Adly, 2012: 47). Violence, however, was often carried out as preventive action that, by unjustifiably killing many innocent, aimed to scare the Libyan population when the real targets were not located. As Hisham writes, the years 1970-1980, were the most violent years of Gaddafi's regime, as

Revolutionary Committees were set up to punish dissent [...]. The Committees hanged students in front of Benghazi cathedral and from the gates of the universities. Traffic was diverted to ensure that commuters saw the dangling corpses. Books and musical instruments that were deemed 'anti-revolutionary' or 'imperialist' were confiscated from shops, schools and homes, piled high in public squares and set alight. Intellectuals, businessmen, union organisers and students were shown on television, sitting handcuffed on the floor, dictating confessions to the camera (2016: 36).

All these actions were carried out as warnings, to scare dissidents and show them their fate if they tried to oppose the regime. Moreover, jingles inciting to the killing of opponents were continually transmitted on television, contributing to the creation and the diffusion of an atmosphere of terror in all the houses.

A crude description of such violence can be found in *In the Country of Men*, where Ustath Rashid's execution is shown on television (Matar, 2006: 181-8). Hanged at the National Basketball Stadium in Tripoli, which was packed with spectators wearing something green, the colour of the regime, and waiting to see the 'traitor' die. As Matar writes, 'the crowd's chanting and cheering was so loud that, so hysterical and constant, that it fused into a continuous hum, like the hum of a giant vacuum cleaner' (2006: 184).

To worsen the situation, when Ustath Rashid was in the throes of death, 'swinging from the rope, the shiny aluminium ladder a metre or two to one side, too far for his swimming legs'

(Matar, 2006: 187), the cheering crowd left the stands in order to desecrate the dangling corpse:

Some of the spectators threw their shoes at Ustath Rashid, a couple of men hugged and dangled from his ankles, then waved to others to come and do the same. They looked like children satisfied with a swing they had just made. Everybody seemed happy (Matar, 2006: 187).

Then, as if such a scene belonged to an unimportant television show, the pink flowers signalling that the broadcast was temporarily interrupted appeared on the screen, 'with the national anthem playing confidently in the background' (Matar, 2006: 188).

When Gaddafi 'promoted himself from captain to colonel and issued orders that senior military officers be arrested', Jaballa, like many other high ranking officers, was arrested and, after five years of imprisonment, was released and stripped off his uniform. As the regime did not want to make senior military men hostile and thus keep potential dissidents at bay, it entrusted them with minor diplomatic missions abroad. In fact, after his release, Jaballa was given a diplomatic post in Libya's Mission to the United Nations. Hisham was born in that period but lived in New York only for three years, because when his father discovered 'the true nature of the new regime' (Matar, 2016: 32-3), he decided to quit his job at the UN and return to Libya. From that moment, the regime kept an eye on him and his family. However, in 1979, after a few years back to the motherland, political repression was so strong that Jaballa decided to move with his family to Cairo. 'In Egypt [they] felt safe' (ibid.: 10), but there was a constantly lingering fear as they knew that the regime never ceased to control them and that Jaballa had to be very careful in all his actions and use secrecy in his movements.

In *The Return*, Hisham describes how living with the gaze of the regime fixed on his father put a strain on the stability of the life they had created for themselves away from Libya. As 'dissidents who fled the country were pursued – some kidnapped or assassinated' (Matar, 2016: 4) Jaballa could not travel on his real passport and used 'false documents with

pseudonyms' (Matar, 2016: 10) and, as Hisham recounts, cautiousness was never enough, as the regime might strike at any moment:

Whenever we were in Europe, [Father] carried a gun. Before getting into the car, he would ask us to stand well away. He would go down on his knees and look under the chassis, cup his hands and peek through the windows for any sign of wiring. Men like him had been shot in train stations and cafés, their cars blown up (Matar, 2016: 5).

Moreover, when the head of foreign intelligence Moussa Koussa announced that 'Gaddafi's campaign to hunt down exiled critics [...] extended to the families of dissidents', the pressure increased even more and no place seemed to be safe enough to protect dissidents' families from the intrusion of the regime. For instance, when Hisham's brother Ziad was attending a boarding school in Switzerland, a group of Revolutionary Committee men managed to reach him and keep him under surveillance from a car parked outside of the school gate; thanks to the intervention of his father's associates, he was urged to return home and leave the school (Matar, 2016: 6).

However, as a fifteen-year-old boy, Ziad seemed not to realise the real scale of events and recounted this episode to his family as an adventure; Hisham, on the other hand, 'was utterly overwhelmed by a feeling of safety and gratitude, as well as by a new fear, sharp and pulsing, in [his] depths. [...] The whole thing weighted down on [his] consciousness. [He] kept thinking about what the men had said' (Matar, 2016: 8-9), worrying for his own and his family's safety.

The image of the Gaddafi's men trying to intimidate an opponent's family can also be found in *In the Country of Men*, where Suleiman and his mother, on their way back from the market are followed by a car with 'four men dressed in dark safari suits. [...] [Suleiman] remembered so suddenly [he] felt [his] heart jump. They were the same Revolutionary Committee men who had come a week before and taken Ustath Rashid' (Matar, 2006: 7). The image of the Revolutionary Committee men in the rear-view mirror conveys well the pervasiveness of the

regime, whose gaze, through the eyes of these men, was always fixed on the most prominent members of the opposition and their families.

The regime also used many 'indirect' strategies to punish dissidents; in fact it targeted their families and relatives, by spreading fear among them, interfering with the normal course of daily activities and, most importantly, by hindering them in their attempts to build a career, to find a job or to move outside the country. This is exactly what happened to Hisham's family, who had to break off contacts with their relatives in Libya not to worsen the situation. As he writes in *The Return*,

The Libyan regime had forbidden nearly all of my father's family from travelling outside the country. [...] On account of Father's politics, it was almost impossible for any male member of my paternal family (except for the odd exception who was loyal to the regime) to gain employment or receive a scholarship. Given the large number of uncles and cousins I have, many were affected by this. And not wishing to strengthen the association and cause them more problems, we did not call nor write to members of our paternal family (Matar, 2016: 76-7).

To summarise, life under the regime was profoundly influenced by the interferences of its apparatus of repression and surveillance; unconscionable violence was the order of the day and there was no space for political dialogue. Dissidents, together with their families, were forced to leave the country and, therefore, to leave the place where their roots, traditions, affections and memories were and to deal with the instability and sense of displacement caused by exile, constantly looking forward to the day they will be able to go back home.

4.2 The condition of the exile: living in limbo

As Said points out, '[exile] is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted' (2002: 173). Exile leaves an indelible mark on all those individuals who experience it, who feel

as if they had been eradicated from their native country and transplanted into another one, where, however, they are unable to completely adapt to the new environment.

Moreover, living in exile can be compared to living 'in limbo', because everything around the exile seems to be just a temporary measure while waiting to go finally back home; Hisham, as well, lived 'the indefinitely postponed drama of return' (Said, 2002: 179), as 'every year, Gaddafi was going to die or be forced to flee the country. Every year, we were going to return home' (Matar, 2016: 16).

The sense of estrangement and displacement caused by exile is particularly strong in Hisham's case, as he has been living in and 'building associations' with many different cities throughout the years (Matar, 2016: 3), however never being able to surrender to a place and call it 'home'. As he writes in *The Return*, he and his family had established connections with many different cities:

Nairobi, where we went on our escape from Libya, in 1979 [...];
Cairo, where we settled into indefinite exile the following year;
Rome, a vacation spot for us; London, where I went at the age
of fifteen for my studies and where for twenty-nine years I have
been doggedly trying to make a life for myself; Paris, where,
fatigued and annoyed by London, I moved in my early thirties,
vowing never to return to England, only to find myself back two
years later (Matar, 2016: 3).

Then, as to New York, the city of his birth, he considers it as a place he hardly knows; in fact, he lived there for three years only, until when his family decided to go back to Libya. However, Hisham continued to think of it as of a place that might provide him, 'in moments of desperation, the possibility of finally cheating [himself] out of exile' (Matar, 2016: 15); in fact, he had fantasised many times about answering 'that old tiresome question 'Where are you from?'' by saying that he was from New York, a statement 'both true and false, like a magic trick' (Matar, 2016: 3-4).

The only place where Hisham seems to be able to settle down is London, as he feels to have 'a correspondence' with England that dates back to when he was ten and visited it for the first time, and that is also at the basis of his choice to go to boarding school there. What probably made him 'leave Egypt, the horses, the Red and Mediterranean seas [...] to live in a large, unheated stone house [...] in the middle of soggy fields and under a sky that almost never broke' (Matar, 2016: 20-1) was the sense of stability, permanence and protection that he seemed to find in England, especially in the landscape:

We drove through hedges that rose high on either side of the road. The further we went, the narrower and deeper the lanes became, as if the earth were folding us in. The light did not alter. The variation was only in the clouds, interlaced thickly together [...]. It all gave me the impression [...], that if I were to put something down here, something of personal value that might be, to anyone else, of no value at all and therefore more vulnerable to damage, it would not be moved. I would be able to come back later and find it exactly where I had left it (Matar, 2016: 21).

If life with his parents in Egypt was marked by instability and the sensation that everything was only a temporary measure given that 'many decisions were suspended because 'We'll be in Libya by then'', in England, Hisham had the sensation that he 'could be in charge of [his] own fate', make decisions and start a new life (Matar, 2016: 22).

However, even if he feels to be 'bound to England, not so much by the length of time [he has] spent [t]here but by nature', there is a part of him that has not completely surrendered to that place yet, and that is still looking forward to go back to Libya, the only place he can really call 'home'. He feels that he lacks that 'resigned stability' he sees in many other exiles he meets, and he seems to be divided between wishing to possess that same stability and refusing the 'naked adoption of native mannerisms or the local dialect – [...] a kind of humiliation' (Matar, 2016: 22-4).

As Said points out, 'exile is a jealous state. What you achieve is precisely what you have no wish to share, [...] even [with] those who may in fact be in the same predicament as you' (2002: 178). In fact, Hisham silently condemned 'those fellow-exiles who wished to assimilate' and In addition, even if he never really adapted to England, he thought he 'knew London's secrets better than most of its natives' (Matar, 2016: 25).

As Hisham explains in *The Return*, 'these contradictions [...] were informed not by London but by the condition of waiting' (Matar, 2016: 25). In fact, he realises that the part of him that has never yielded to England nor to any other country where lived with his parents was the one that secretly longed to return to Libya and never ceased to wait for that day to come:

It turns out that I have spent all the time since I was eight years old, when my family left Libya, waiting. [...] My bloody-minded commitment to rootlessness was my feeble act of fidelity to the old country, or maybe not even to Libya but to the young boy I was when we left (Matar, 2016: 25).

Thus, Hisham has been waiting for his return to Libya since forever. He feels as if he were divided into two, one part representing his adult self, striving to find some kind of stability in life and to come to terms with the sense of displacement caused by the exile; the other part, instead, corresponds to himself as a child, who, months after the departure from Libya,

Used to lie staring at the ceiling, imagining [his] return. [He] pictured how [he] would kiss the ground; take charge once again of [his] chariot, that bicycle [he] fussed over and oiled every week; embrace [his] cousins (Matar, 2016: 39).

Hisham feels torn between the eight-year-old boy he was when he lived in Libya with his family, the fifteen-year-old boy who decided to leave Egypt to go to study in England thinking to be finally charge of his own fate there, and the forty-one-year-old man who was preparing himself to return 'home'. As Hisham writes, 'I was now fifteen. I was now forty-one. I was now

eight' (Matar, 2016: 26); his younger self longing to return 'home' has never grown up and Hisham 'noticed how old [he] had become, but also the boyishness that persisted, as if part of [him] had stopped developing the moment [he] left Libya' with his family (Matar, 2016: 15).

The part of Hisham that stopped developing when he left Libya is not that different from Uncle Hmad's younger self, which 'with its love for the theatre and a thousand and one plans for the future, had been restrained and conserved by captivity' (Matar, 2016: 258). Moreover, Hisham is convinced that

Our younger selves are with us always. But in a life of activity, one free from dramatic rupture, where the progress of things is unbroken by catastrophe, where the skin of our thoughts is regularly touched by new impressions, discoveries and influences, our maturation comes to follow a gradient that creates the illusion of a seamless line (Matar, 2016: 258).

Hisham seems also to draw a parallel between exiles and ex-prisoners; they represent two figures in which he recognises the same inability to find some kind of stability in life, as they are both irremediably marked by terrible experiences, respectively exile and imprisonment. In fact, exile has such a destabilising effect on Hisham that, even when he returns to Libya in 2012 after having spent thirty-three years away from home, he experiences 'a kind of distance-sickness, a state in which not only the ground was unsteady but also time and space' (Matar, 2016: 118). Even if he is initially inebriated by 'the drunkenness of return' (ibid.: 70), the embrace of Libya's heat and the warm hospitality of his relatives, he soon recognises that there is some sort of friction in the encounter between the past and the present.

In fact, when in company of those relations of his who never left Libya, Hisham has the impression that 'everyone else's development had been linear, allowed to progress naturally in the known environment, [...] linked [...] to the original setting-off point', while he feels split, divided between the eight-year-old self still living in Libya and the forty-year-old self searching for his identity. By 'returning to that pre-life', Hisham hopes to be able to find 'that other self

who lives in harmony with his surroundings, who exists, like a chapter in a book, in the right place, not torn out and left to make sense on its own' (Matar, 2016: 118-9).

However, after all those years spent abroad, in which he matured into a man trying to build a life and a career for himself, his return to Libya makes him realise that there is a 'gulf' between his homeland and himself; as he writes in *The Return*, he is unable to retrieve the bond with Libya, as

All the tools [he] had to connect with [his] country belonged to the past. [...] Now [he] could see the walls, so old [he] had never noticed them before, that stood between [him] and everyone [he has] ever known, every book and painting and symphony and work of art that had ever mattered to [him], suddenly seeming impermanent (Matar, 2016: 119).

Hisham's resolution to return to Libya after a 'chasm' of thirty-three years seems not to come from a well thought-out decision; in fact, he describes it as a 'proposition [that] presented itself. It seemed immaculate, a thought [his] mind had manufactured independently'. As he is constantly torn between the wish to return and the vow never to return, he fears that 'such journeys [...] could rob [him] of a skill [he has] worked hard to cultivate: how to live away from places and people [he] love[s]' (Matar, 2016: 2-3).

Thus, he asks 'What do you do when you cannot leave and cannot return?' (Matar, 2016: 2), as if he were stuck in a 'land in between', a place where the eight-year-old Hisham, with his 'longing for the colours and distractions of [Tripoli] and its sea' was trying to come to terms with the adult Hisham, who has managed to make a 'fragile life' for himself in London but the colours of which 'have remained [...] as unnatural as the invisible film placed on windows to dull the light' (ibid.: 106).

Thus, as Doloughan points out in her analysis of Milan Kundera's novel *Ignorance* (2002), the 'great return' seems to represent a myth that 'offers little fulfilment, as [exiles] discover that life in their adopted countries [...] has more reality for them than what they have returned to find' (2004: 141). Moreover, according to her interpretation, 'the possibility of recovering

memories of the past with any accuracy and completeness [is] always illusory. [...] The exilic condition is one where past and present, old and new, co-exist and intermingle.

Moreover, it seems that in the modern age it is not possible to speak of exile and return in the same terms as in the past. For instance, the *Odyssey*, the grand narrative 'which glorifies a return to the known and the finite rather than the infinitude of adventure and the unknown' (Doloughan, 2004: 143), seems not to be pertinent to our time anymore. In fact, Kundera's characters, like Hisham, see that their 'expectations of people and places are not met and [they fail] to identify with [their] former [selves] and [their] former [lives]' (ibid.: 147).

In Kundera's novel, like in *The Return*, 'the experience of return, where the characters live in a kind of no-man's-land [...], helps to cement their attachments to the lives they have been living in their adopted homelands' (Doloughan, 2004: 148), where they feel they are in control of their own fate and go on with life without having to confront their former lives and selves.

Matar reflects the constant sense of displacement that characterises his own life in the protagonist of his first novel, *In the Country of Men*. In fact, Suleiman, like the author, manages to integrate 'rather smoothly' (Matar, 2006: 229) into his new existence away from Libya, but the thought of the native country always remains in the background and never disappears, as a reminder of an irrecoverable loss.

Sent to Egypt by his parents in order to save him from the military service and give him the opportunity to receive an adequate education, Suleiman initially misses home terribly, especially the familiar smells, and gestures like digging his face into his mother's neck and kissing his father's hand (Matar, 2006: 231). Over time, however,

Libya grew distant in the background, began to mean little. [...] His accent had quickly become Cairene, and [he] stopped trying to adjust it when calling home. [...] What was astonishing is how free [he] came to feel from Libya. [...] Nationalism is as thin as a thread, perhaps that's why many feel it must be anxiously guarded (Matar, 2006: 229-30).

In those years, the Libyan government had issued several decrees, increasingly desperate, ordering Suleiman to return to Libya to do military service; as he ignored them and never returned to his native country, he was labelled as an 'Evader' and, 'like all Libyans who don't return, the shadow of suspicion fell firmly on [him]'. The situation became even worse when the government adopted new measures to further punish Suleiman by refusing to issue a visa for his parents, 'holding them hostage, as it were, until the evading Stray Dog returned'. Thus, Suleiman asks himself 'Why does our country long for us so savagely? What could we possibly give her that hasn't already been taken?' (Matar, 2006: 230).

However, his refusal to go back to Libya and the fact that he has adapted to his new life in Egypt quite well do not mean that the distance that separates him from his family and his past has no impact on him at all. As Suleiman confesses,

I suffer an absence, an ever-present absence, like an orphan not entirely certain of what he has missed or gained through his unchosen loss. [...] Egypt has not replaced Libya. Instead, there is this void, this emptiness I am trying to get at like someone frightened of the dark, searching for a match to strike (Matar, 2006: 232).

To conclude, for exiles, the sense of estrangement and displacement caused by their condition is insurmountable, and the clash between the longing for the past and the effort to adapt to their present situation is unavoidable, as

Habits of life, expression, or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally (Said, 2002: 186).

As Matar's experience has shown, 'exile is life led outside habitual order. It is nomadic, decentred, contrapuntal; but no sooner does one get accustomed to it than its unsettling force erupts anew' (Said, 2002: 186).

4.3 Exile, literature and language

As Said points out, 'modern Western culture is in large part the work of exiles, émigrés, refugees. [Much] academic, intellectual and aesthetic thought is what it is today because of refugees from [...] regimes given to the oppression and expulsion of dissidents.' Moreover, literature by and about exiles, defined by George Steiner as "extraterritorial literature", plays a particularly important role in the Western literary panorama of the 20th century as the scale of mass migration, due to modern warfare, imperialism and totalitarian regimes, is almost alarming (Said, 2002: 174).

However, there is always the risk, as Said notices, that the great resonance of the literature of exile transforms it into 'a *topos* of human experience, [as] much of the contemporary interest in exile can be traced to the somewhat pallid notion that non-exiles can share in the benefits of exile as a redemptive motif' (2002: 183). In fact, 'Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience' (ibid.: 173).

In addition, as Suleiman believes, a distinctive feature of exile as a subject is its orientation towards a broad analysis that encompasses reflections about nationalism, cultural and individual identity, racism and war. In fact,

Few subjects elicit as much intellectual ambivalence – but also, especially of late, as much intellectual fascination – as the subject of exile. In its narrow sense a political banishment, exile in its broad sense designates every kind of estrangement or displacement, from the physical and geographical to the spiritual (1998: 2).

Literature dealing with exile and estrangement plays a crucial role in Matar's life; in the attempt to make sense of his own exile, he reflects on the life experiences of different artists such as Brodsky, Nabokov and Conrad, who never returned to the homeland, and of others

who, on the contrary, never left the homeland, such as Shostakovich, Pasternak and Mahfouz. (Matar, 2016: 2) Moreover, the literature of exile represents for Matar an authentic commitment, as he gives lectures about it, which also are a sort of escape for him.

As Matar declares in an interview with the journalist Benedetta Tobagi, what he really thinks is magic about literature is not the encounter with something new, but the fact that readers can recognise themselves in the lives of others. In Matar's view, this moment of recognition encloses the meaning of being both human and humane, as well as an intellectual and emotional growth (2017: 2).

In most cases, living in exile does not only mean being away from one's native country, but it also means to be 'at a distance from one's native tongue' (Suleiman, 1998: 1). All exiles establishing in a new country, whether as a temporary measure or not, need to learn to communicate in the language of the host country, if different from their own.

If learning a new language may be a necessity for exiles, examples of '[exiled] writers who adopt a language not their own are much rarer', that is, writers who show 'complete linguistic assimilation' and decide to write all their works into an acquired language. The 'modern archetype, writing *all* of his work in English' (Brooke-Rose, 1998: 14-5) is Joseph Conrad, who is described by Said as

an example of someone whose life and work seemed to typify the fate of the wanderer who becomes an accomplished writer in an acquired language, but can never shake off his sense of alienation from his new – that is, acquired – [...] home (2002: 554).

However, the fact that an author writes all his works in an acquired language does not mean that he/she has fully integrated in the new country; in fact, 'the moment one enters [Conrad's] writing the aura of dislocation, instability and strangeness is unmistakable' and 'the loss of home and language in the new setting [...] [is] irredeemable, relentlessly anguished, raw, untreatable, always acute' (Said, 2002: 554-5).

The constant sense of displacement that characterises the life of the exile is exacerbated by the question of the language, which provokes an even deeper sense of estrangement from the surrounding environment, as if it were impossible to establish a connection with it. As Said explains when talking about his own experience as a refugee educated in élite colonial schools in Egypt, being imposed a new language, especially when this is has nothing in common with one's native language, deprives the individual of the means of talking about the world and him/herself effectively. In fact, and especially when talking about the early years in Egypt, he cannot forget the

Sense of doubt and of being out of place, of always feeling [himself] standing in the wrong corner, in a place that seemed to be slipping away from [him] just had [he] tried to define or describe it. Why [...] could [he] not have had [...] to face the daily rigors of questions that led back to words that seemed to lack a stable origin? (Said, 2002: 558).

According to Said, a similar predicament linked to the acquired language can also be found in Conrad's writings, which 'carr[y] the unmistakable mark of the sensitive émigré's obsession with his own fate and with his hopeless attempts to make satisfying contact with new surroundings.' Moreover, 'Conrad took this neurotic exile's fear and created an aesthetic principle out of it' (Said, 2002: 179-80), by making the difficulties connected to the exile a key of interpretation of his texts:

No one can understand or communicate in Conrad's world, but paradoxically this radical limitation on the possibilities of language doesn't inhibit elaborate efforts to communicate. All of Conrad's stories are about lonely people who talk a great deal [...]. Each Conradian exile fears, and is condemned endlessly to imagine the spectacle of a solitary death illuminated [...] by unresponsive, uncommunicating eyes (Said, 2002: 180).

Said's experience of exile, and especially the relating 'warring relationship between English and Arabic' (Said, 2002: 558), can be compared with Matar's experience, in which the question of the language plays a significant role as well. Educated in Egypt in English public schools where languages other than English were outlawed first and in the United States then, Said feels divided between the Arabic language, which is his native language, and English, his school language. As if the only 'language' he feels his own lied in the passage from one language to the other, he writes:

[they] were inextricably mixed: I have never known which was my first language, and have felt fully at home in neither, although I dream in both. Every time I speak an English sentence, I find myself echoing it in Arabic, and vice versa (Said, 2002: 557).

Also for Matar, exile means being confronted with a new school and with a new language; as he recounts in an article for *The Guardian*, after the decline of the Egyptian public school system, his parents gave him the opportunity to study in a foreign language school in Cairo. The only language he knew was Arabic, so, to him, one language was as good as another; in the end, he chose to study in an English school, 'with the recklessness of someone accepting a dare' (2016: 4).

At the beginning, English was a barrier that prevented him from making friends with his new companions, 'sons and daughters of American diplomats and military personnel'; however, he struggled to learn it, even if 'nothing makes you feel more stupid than learning a new language [as] you lose your confidence. You want to disappear. Not be noticed. Say as little as possible' (2016: 5).

Some years later, he moves to boarding school in England, and then attends university in London. He gradually finds his way in the Anglo Saxon world and, even if English has become 'the language of [his] new life, the one in which [he] think[s] and imagine[s] , and it's the language [he] use[s] now to remember [his] old life', he has not forgotten Arabic, the language to which his childhood, his roots and traditions are tied (2016: 6). As he writes,

What has been acquired does not erase what was there before. In the beginning, the two languages exist as two forms in a collage or two parallel musical notes: separate and yet producing a third effect. [...] You are the vibration between the notes. [...] Language is translation. Each word we use stands for something but can never be that thing. And like all translation, language is compromised and propelled [...] by all the gaps where we might find ourselves (2016: 7).

The fact of being a 'Libyan who writes in English', as he defines himself, has taught him something important about language, namely that 'the daily labour of writers is translation'. The real concern of the writer is not what language to write in, but the search for 'directness, a true mother tongue, a language before language, one that can go straight to the heart of things, that can capture the quickest, most nebulous and fleeting thought or emotion' (2016: 7).

Chapter 5

The power of literature

The aim of this chapter is that of focusing on different literary features and themes that are fundamental for a thorough analysis of Matar's books. After having made an initial distinction between the two main categories into which his books are usually classified, namely novel and memoir, the analysis will focus on the second one and on the ways in which it stands out from other types of self-referential modes of writing, such as autobiography.

Then, attention will shift to internal narratives, namely stories told by characters featuring in the books. Stories are a constant presence in Matar's writings and play a crucial role especially in *The Return*, where they take on special significance; in fact, they represent 'an effort against erasure [and] part of [the] old human struggle against mortality' (Matar, 2016: 75) as they allow Hisham to throw light on the brutality of the dictatorship and on the inescapable truth about his father's fate. Moreover, stories will be analysed by taking into account Adriana Cavarero's philosophy of narration and reflections on storytelling, in order to show that they help Hisham not only to draw a more complete picture of his father but also to see what Jaballa has left behind him, that is a path made of actions, words, stories and verses.

In addition, love for literature, both in the form of prose and of verse, recurs frequently in Matar's works; for instance, the father figure is depicted as being fond of literature and, thus, endowed with great sensitivity. To conclude, this chapter will deal with Matar's distinctive approach to writing, focusing mainly on the terms in which he conceives the relationship between the author and his works, the satisfaction and frustration that the writing process entails.

5.1 Genre distinction

5.1.1 Fiction and non-fiction

When classifying Matar's books by genre, *In the Country of Men* and *Anatomy of a Disappearance* usually go under the heading 'novel', while *The Return* belongs to the 'memoir' genre, which is a specific type of 'life writing'. Generally, individuals tend to associate these two genres, respectively, with the broader categories of 'fiction' and 'non-fiction', identifying 'fiction' with the recounting of invented stories, which might be more or less plausible, and 'non-fiction' with the narration of true events.

However, according to Smith and Watson, life writing and novels cannot be associated, respectively, with 'non-fictional' and 'fictional' writing, as such labels tend to confuse rather than clarify any distinctions between life writing and novels. In their view, the difference between these two genres is in the way they relate to the world of reference. In fact, they believe that

life writing and the novel share features we ascribe to fictional writing: plot, dialogue, setting, characterisation, and so on. But they are distinguished by their relationship to and claims about a referential world. We might helpfully think of what [novels] represent as "a world", and what life writing refers to as "the world" (2010: 9-10).

Thus, by adopting Smith and Watson's point of view, Matar's works all share features that characterise fictional writing, such as setting, dialogue and plot; however, what distinguishes his two novels from the memoir lies in the worlds the author describes in them. In other words, even if the Egypt depicted in *Anatomy of a Disappearance* and *In the Country of Men* is very similar to that in which the author lived, it is not the very same country where his family lived when in exile. On the contrary, the Libya Matar describes in *The Return*, is *the* world where the author has spent his childhood and that occupies a special place in his heart. In fact,

novelists are bound only by the reader's expectation of internal consistency in the world of verisimilitude created within the novel [...] [and] are not bound by rules of evidence that link the world of the narrative with a historical world outside the narrative. [They] practice a "suspension of disbelief" when engaging [...] fictional worlds. In contrast, life narrators inevitably refer to the world beyond the text, the world that is the ground of the narrator's lived experience, even if that ground is in part composed of cultural myths, dreams fantasies, and subjective memories (Smith & Watson, 2010: 12).

Fludernik too rejects the distinction between 'fictional' narratives and 'non-fictional' narratives, as 'narrative is fictional per se, not because it is 'made up' or deals with fantastic occurrences, but because it is based on the representation of psychological states and mental perceptions' (2009: 60). Thus, like Smith and Watson, Fludernik does not take into consideration for her analysis whether the events narrated are invented or not; on the contrary, she puts the accent on the depiction of human experience and emotions, while she thinks that actions are not central. In fact, she points out that

the essence of narrative [...] is the communication of anthropocentric experience – the experientiality which is inherent in human experience – and this means drawing on fixed patterns of behaviour as well as conveying thoughts and feelings, and depicting perceptions and reflections. Hence, narrative is not merely a sequence of events; rather such sequences are an integral part of human experience and this is why they feature prominently in stories. Action is, however, not absolutely necessary in order to construct a narrative (Fludernik, 2009: 59).

Thus, by analysing Matar's works in the light of Fludernik's thought, they all belong to the category of fiction, as they all devote considerable space to the representation of a variety of psychological states and human feelings; in addition, reflection and meditation prevail upon actions, which prove to be important but not fundamental to build a narrative.

In conclusion, the distinction between 'fiction' and 'non-fiction' is much contested and it represents a slippery ground, because it is easy to fall into contradictions and inaccurate categorisation. For the sake of clarity, the main distinction that will be adopted in this chapter to classify Matar's books is that made by Smith and Watson between life writing and novels, the two categories into which Matar's books can be classified. However, as Matar reveals in an interview for *The New York Times*,

[He has] never been particularly interested in genre distinctions. They seem to [him] more useful to a librarian than to a writer. Each book [he has] written has a different attitude and sensibility and therefore has demanded, technically and intellectually and emotionally, different things (Williams, 2016: 2).

5.1.2 Life writing: memoir vs autobiography

Life writing is a broad category that includes ‘a set of shifting [both] self-referential and [non-self-referential] practices that, in engaging the past, reflect on identity in the present’ (Smith & Watson, 2010: 1). While in non-self-referential life writing, such as biographies, ‘scholars of other people’s lives document and interpret those lives from a point of view external to the subject’ (ibid.: 5), in self-referential life writing, such as autobiographies and memoirs, the author becomes ‘both the observing subject and the object of investigation, remembrance and contemplation’ (ibid.: 1).

Even if they belong to the same broad category of self-referential life narrative and they are often used interchangeably in contemporary parlance (Smith & Watson, 2010: 274), memoir and autobiography present substantial differences. While autobiography seems to be mainly concerned with the retrospective narration of ‘*how* one has become who he or she is at a given moment in an ongoing process of reflection’ (ibid.: 1), the memoir appears to be a way for the author to ‘look for [his/her] past with acts of writing’ (Zinsser et al., 1987: 21), as if to find some sort of truth about the past, by choosing to select some portions of it, regardless of the chronological order. As Zinsser points out:

Unlike autobiography, which moves in a dutiful line from birth to fame, omitting nothing significant, memoir assumes the life and ignores most of it. The writer of a memoir takes us back to a corner of his or her life that was unusually vivid or intense - childhood, for instance – or that was framed by unique events. By narrowing the lens, the writer achieves a focus that isn’t

possible in autobiography; memoir is a window into a life (1987: 21).

Thus, rejecting the chronological order that characterises autobiography and that, according to Annie Dillard, 'would make very dull reading' (Dillard, 1987: 55), the author of a memoir 'must become the editor of his own life. He must cut and prune an unwieldy story and give it a narrative shape' (ibid.: 24).

Moreover, as Dillard points out, the writer of self-referential life narratives has to decide 'what to put in [the text] and what to leave out [from it]' (Dillard, 1987: 25). As authors of self-referential life writings know the whole iceberg, which represents their own life, what they have to do is make a selection and include in the text only what is relevant for their work. But while with autobiography writers 'delete all [that] is irrelevant, then line up what's left in the proper linear order [...]', memoir authors 'take out all the burred memories, all the recollections [that] may have been dressed up by [the] mind [...], leaving only the events that [they] can't get out of [their] heads (Thomas, 1987: 128).

Thus, to summarise, a memoir is a specific type of self-referential life writing that, differently from the autobiography, the genre it is most frequently confused with, 'takes a segment of a life, not its entirety, and focus[es] on interconnected experiences' (Smith & Watson, 2010: 274), not necessarily following a chronological order. The memoir is not only a way for a writer to deal with part of his/her own life, but it represents also a voyage to 'the well of memory' (Zinsser, 1987: 24), where the deepest emotions are.

In fact, according to Creswell, 'it seems unfair to call [*The Return*] a memoir, since it is so many other things besides: a reflection on exile and the consolations of art, an analysis of authoritarianism, a family history, a portrait of a country in the throes of revolution, and an impassioned work of mourning' (2016: 1). Moreover, in *The Return* much space is devoted to the father figure, the absence of which has affected Matar so deeply that it has almost become an obsession. Stories about his father and about life in Abu Salim play a crucial role in this work, and Matar, next to the depiction of his own experiences, seems to be trying to recover and reconstruct a coherent narrative of his father's life path, as if the coherence of his own depended on this.

However, the stories Matar is told during his return trip to Libya do not only concern his father, but also other members of his family, such as his mother and his uncles. This way, the author discovers new aspects about his family he was not aware of and, by putting together all these stories, he also tries to get a clearer and more complete picture of all his relatives. *The Return*, thus, is not only an exploration of the self but also a journey of discovery of the family.

All the stories Hisham is told during his return trip to Libya are comparable to limbs scattered around across the country and that he is trying to put together in order to get a coherent picture of his life so far. This sense of 'dismemberment' and fracture recurs frequently in *The Return*, where he feels 'the past, like a severed limb, try[ing] to fix itself on to the body of the present' (Matar, 2016: 108). In the end, what Matar hopes to be able to do is to 'finally be released' (Matar, 2016: 40) from his obsession with his father's whereabouts and fate and all the anxiety connected to it.

5.2 The power of stories

Matar's works are characterised by the presence of embedded narratives, in other words, by a multitude of 'stories within the story', which belong to the intradiegetic level of communication existing between characters, who become in their turn narrators and narratees (Fludernik, 2009: 28). Usually, the main protagonist and first-person narrator becomes the narratee; in fact, Suleiman, Nuri as well as Hisham are told stories that often help them to lift the veil of mystery interposing between them and their families and, in the case of Hisham, to find out more about what his father might have endured in prison. However, when stories are too much to take in, the protagonist- narratee feels the need to organise them all into a coherent narrative, so as to be able to make sense of them (Matar, 2006: 11), as Matar does in *The Return*.

There are many reasons why individuals feel the need to tell stories: the act of telling and sharing one's own story or experience can provide comfort and consolation; in addition, stories can be precious testimonies that oppose the power of history to swallow up events and make them sink into oblivion.

To begin with, in *In the Country of Men*, Suleiman's mother keeps telling her son about her 'black day', namely, the day she got married with Faraj and that seems to have left an indelible mark on her. Suleiman's mother, whom the young boy compares to Scheherazade, resumes

and repeats her story very time she has a breakdown, as if going over and sharing her story was part of a rite she had created for herself and could provide her some kind of comfort. However, like Scheherazade, she never moves in a straight line, and Suleiman has to ‘restrain [himself] and try to remember every piece of the story in the hope that one day [he] could fit it all into a narrative that was straight and clear and simple’ (Matar, 2006: 11). The same comfort is experienced in the retelling of Ustath Rashid’s execution at the National Basketball Stadium; going obsessively over and over the details of his death, trying not to neglect any of them, seems to be the only way to make sense of his unjustifiably cruel end (Matar, 2006: 188).

Then, in *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, Béatrice, Kamal’s lover, tells Nuri the details of how his father was kidnapped with the precision of a testimony (Matar, 2011: 216). However, in the telling of this story there is no comfort, but only the statement of the uncertainty and the doubts surrounding Kamal’s whereabouts.

In *The Return*, instead, storytelling takes on a special quality and, besides being a source of comfort, it becomes ‘part of [the] human struggle against mortality’ (Matar, 2016: 75). Stories, in fact, represent a way of preserving and passing on some precious testimonies that the course of history would inevitably engulf and forget, and a way of celebrating the power of life and hope over death. In fact, as Hisham writes of his relatives’ stories about their imprisonment, he had the impression that

they wanted to bring [him] into the darkness, to expose the suffering and, in doing so, discreetly and indirectly emphasize the bitter and momentous achievement of having survived it. [...] And [he] sensed enjoyment in their telling, in having the savage horror of their time in prison – a period covering between one-third to one-half of each man’s life so far – sit side by side with the gentleness of a liberal afternoon with tea and cigarettes (Matar, 2016: 260).

Thus, sharing the story of the imprisonment is a way to affirm the victory of light over the darkness of the prison cell. For Uncle Mahmoud, for instance, telling his story is a way of

making his own voice heard over the silence that has always characterised the regime and, above all, it is a way of stating that he survived and that the dictatorship failed to kill his desire to live, even after twenty-one years of imprisonment. In fact, as Hisham writes,

[Uncle Mahmoud's] stories were aimed at proving that the authorities had failed, that he had not been erased, that he continued to remember [...]. His stories were an attempt to bridge the vast distance that separated the austere cruelty of Abu Salim and the world outside. Perhaps, like all stories, what Uncle Mahmoud's recollections were saying was: 'I exist' (Matar, 2016: 52).

Through Uncle Mahmoud's words, Hisham also discovers that his family had been monitored for years by the Egyptian authorities, who recorder all their telephone calls and took photos of them wherever they went. Moreover, through his telling, he can imagine what his father might have been through in Abu Salim prison: the sense of disorientation at being kidnapped, handcuffed, blindfolded and brought to a dark and unknown place, the unforgettable 'horrific noise [...] of the heavy door' (Matar, 2016: 53), and the glimmer of hope given by the tiny holes in the prison walls, which allowed prisoners to smuggle letters outside Abu Salim.

Notwithstanding Uncle Mahmoud's enthusiasm in telling his story and his willingness to oppose the alienating effect a long period of imprisonment can have on prisoners, there seems to be a part of him that remains unable to overcome the brutality and the cruelty of that period and is still trying to come to terms with it. As Hisham notices by observing him while playing with his children,

Only in the background, in some secret compartment of his being, did there seem to be a quiet, resolute withdrawal [...]. At times, in mid-conversation, his thoughts brought him to a sudden silence. [...] It cast a distance between him and the world that, like the fan shape the fisherman's net leaves when it

touches the surface of the water, was only momentarily perceptible. [...] Perhaps Uncle Mahmoud had called a truce [...] – one of those silent manoeuvres intended to veil us from a world of infinite danger (Matar, 2016: 75-6).

A similar 'fracture', or indelible mark, left by the imprisonment can be perceived also in Uncle Hmad, Jaballa's brother-in-law. As Hisham notices, 'he seemed young and old at once, [...] as if the young man he was at the point of his arrest and the man he had become [existed] in parallel, destined never to meet and yet resonating against one another like two discordant musical notes' (Matar, 2016: 258).

However, he 'was eager to share his recollections'; for instance, the details relating to the interrogations, which 'were so awful that when they finally took you back to the cell, you were as happy returning to that miserable place as you would be going home to your wife and children' (Matar, 2016: 259-263). Then, from the harsh conditions in which prisoners were kept to the 1996 massacre, one of the most inhumane and merciless actions ever carried out by the regime. As Hmad narrates, 'the shooting lasted for two hours [and was] as a drill inside the head. [...] But worst of all was all the screaming. [...] The dead were left there for four days. Until the smell caused many of [the prisoners] to vomit'. Hisham is so struck by Hmad's account that he can almost hear that 'drill' inside his head, and starts to imagine his father as having died in that 'diabolical nightmare' (Matar, 2016: 269):

I saw part of his foot, then his ankle lying still on the ground, dusted by the movement of others. His creased palm, half closed. The gentle strength of his torso. And, for a quick instant, his face. [...] All this together with a final realization that he would never see us again. I felt the violent force of vertigo. As though he and I were standing on opposite sides of a river, and the water was growing wider, as wide as an ocean now (Matar, 2016: 270).

According to Hmad's story, the bodies of the prisoners died in the Abu Salim massacre 'were buried where they fell, in shallow mass graves. Months later, they were exhumed. The bones were ground to dust and the powder poured into the sea' (Matar, 2016: 270). This is an example of how, in the end, all that remains over time of those human lives, of their endurance, their efforts and their ideals, is just a heap of dust, which the passing of time inevitably wipes away and relegates into oblivion.

Not only human actions surrender to the course of history, but also all those monuments and buildings which were erected as symbols and display of power. This sense of transience relating to human undertakings and achievements can also be detected in *In the Country of Men*, in Suleiman's description of the ruins of Leptis Magna, which remind of Shelley's *Ozymandias* (1817), where 'round the decay/of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare/the lone and level sands stretch far away' (vv. 12-14) :

The abandoned city scattered by the lapping sea, its twisted columns like heavy sleeping giants by the shore, [...] a broken frieze that displayed part of the Emperor's name. Absence was everywhere. Arches stood without the walls and roofs [...] in the empty square under the open sky, like old men trying to remember where they were going. [...] White-stone cobbled streets [...] marched bravely into the rising sand that erased them (Matar, 2006: 26-7).

However, stories have the power of saving human lives, sharing and fixing actions, words and undertakings from the vortex of time and history, which swallows up and erodes everything, leaving individuals only with their memories of a past whose outline gradually blurs and then disappears. In the end, 'what *endures* [are] spaces in the heart that accommodate the absent, [...] the hard earth, [...] echoes of footsteps leading out of a cracking courtyard, and the sound a house makes when it is falling down. [...] Starting again' (Owuor, 2014: 354-362).

For Hisham, his relatives' storytelling does not only represent a precious testimony for the listener and a source of comfort for the narrator; the encounters with Uncle Mahmoud and Uncle Hmad are a sort of mutual exchange that

exposed the riptides between [them]. They wanted to tell [him] about what life was during the two decades in prison, and [he] was keen to let them know how much [he] thought of them. It was an exchange of promises and devotion. They wanted [him] to know that their loyalty to Father had not faltered [...] and, in doing so, [...] they were acknowledging what they refused to accept: that he was dead' (Matar, 2016: 259-60).

To conclude, the return trip to Libya taught Matar 'something about the power of stories, and how through them we can travel through time and share, at least in our imaginations, former aspects of ourselves, [...] that we can endure great suffering and survive, mostly intact yet altered' (Williams, 2016: 3).

5.3 Narrating life paths

As Cavarero writes, 'the pattern that every human being leaves behind is nothing but their life-story.' (2000: 2) Thus, all the actions, experiences and enterprises each individual carries out throughout life are like the footprints left behind when treading on soft earth – they draw a path, the shape and, possibly, the unity of which can only be seen from a distance. However, life and all that it entails, cannot be reduced to a mere succession of actions; in fact,

the meaning that saves each life from being a mere sequence of events does not consist in a determined figure; but rather consist precisely in leaving behind a figure, or something from which the unity of a design can be discerned in the telling of the story. Like the design, the story comes after the events and the actions from which it results [and it] can only be narrated from the posthumous perspective of someone who does not participate in the events. (ibid.: 2)

Thus, in view of Cavarero's observations, authors of self-referential life writings would be inaccurate in their attempt to follow the pattern that the course of their lives is still leaving behind them and, most of all, to give it some kind of unity and meaning from an internal point of view. It seems that 'nothing responds to the human desire more than the telling of our story'; however, 'the figural unity of the design, the unifying meaning of the story, can only be posed, by the one who lives it, in the form of a question. Or, perhaps, in the form of a desire' (2000: 2-4).

In *The Return*, Hisham can be seen as trying to narrate two stories and deal with two life-paths that are closely intertwined, namely his own and that of his father. As to his own life, Hisham decides to tell about his return trip to Libya and the way in which this has helped him to make sense of his life path, so far characterised by doubts and uncertainties deriving from his condition of exile and his father's absence. However, as the unity of the path can only be 'posed, by the one who lives it, in the form of a question' (Cavarero, 2000: 2), what seems to resonate throughout Matar's works is the question 'How much of him is there in me? Can you become a man without becoming your father?' (Matar, 2006: 149).

As to his father's path, Hisham's choice to narrate it does not only derive from a need to give a unity to it and be able to feel that sense of finality usually given by funerals (Matar, 2016: 34); what probably further motivates Hisham is the 'ethic of the gift in the pleasure of the narrator. The one who narrates not only entertains and enchants, [...] but gives to the protagonists of his/her story their own [design]' (ibid.: 3). From this point of view, *The Return* might represent a 'gift' Hisham makes to his father, with the hope that one day he will come back and be able to read his life story. Moreover, this book might also be a gift the author makes to his country, in which he organises into a narrative stories and testimonies of the cruelty of the regime that has torn Libya apart.

In *The Return*, Hisham becomes the 'narrator' of his father, as life-stories, according to Cavarero, have no author, but they only wait to be told:

'[Jaballa's] story, like every story, has no author. It simply results from [his] actions. [...] The story that results from his actions is, in this sense, an impalpable plot that goes in search of its tale, of its narrator. Even if a life-story has never an author, it always

has a protagonist – a hero, as we say, not by chance – and, sometimes, a narrator. (Cavarero, 2000: 24)

5.4 The importance of literature for Matar's characters

Literature, both in the form of prose and poetry, plays an important role in life, as it can be a source of consolation and a retaliation against a harsh situation; moreover, it can offer the opportunity of bringing individual closer to some sensitive issues or historical facts.

In Matar's books, literature is shown as playing an important role especially in the life of male characters, as if to put the accent on their sensitivity. In fact, even if they are mainly concerned with their jobs and spend little time with their families, they always manage to find some time to devote to literature, which seems to grant them a momentary escape from reality.

In *In the Country of Men*, for instance, the father figure, a businessman travelling the world and who seems to care only for his job and his political activity, is depicted as a man possessing great sensitivity, which only literature has the power to bring out. In fact, when Faraj is reading, he does not feel anything, as if books brought him to another world, and he is so focused reading that he does not even feel his son pulling his hair (Matar, 2006: 99). Moreover, Suleiman remembers seeing his father cry in his study after having read something written by his friend Ustath Rashid; he had never seen his father with tears in his eyes before and, with the innocence belonging to a child, '[he] could not understand why reading something beautiful made him cry' (Matar, 2006: 38).

The person who seems to have introduced Suleiman to literature is Moosa, a family friend who is especially fond of poetry and loves to read it aloud with fervour, accompanying himself with gestures, as if it were a performance. In Suleiman's description of Moosa's praise of words, there is much of the author's love for literature:

When Moosa read [...], his hands would change with the words, sometimes urgent and quick and sometimes gentle and slow, and when he would reach a place he liked he would leave the book open on his lap, clap his hands and sing into the air [...] 'What's all of this light, this wonder, this spectacular majesty,

this precision – absolute precision of language [...].’ If it was poetry he would [...] speak – each – word – as – if – it – were – a – building – standing – alone. [...] Poetry, he used to always repeat, is words in action (Matar, 2006: 56-7).

As to the nine-year-old boy, he is still too young and innocent to understand all the passages from Moosa’s favourite poet Salah Abd al-Sabur. However, he has instilled in Suleiman his love for language and helped to develop a certain sensitivity, so that he feels ‘unsettled whenever [he] recognise[s] something familiar in a poem, something [he] thought [he] had experienced (Matar, 2006: 57).

Then, in *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, the father figure is shown as being particularly attached to a book, one ‘he had hardly parted since [his wife] died’: Badr Shakir al Sayyab’s *Rain Song*. And Nuri, who usually tried to follow the track of his father’s thoughts by reading the same newspaper articles his father read or passages from the books he had with him, could not understand what ‘a man so single-mindedly committed to never-uttered plans, a man who consulted only history and news and who seemed to apply his attention with efficient precision to his designs, saw in al-Sayyab’s poetry’ (Matar, 2011: 26-7).

He could not think that his father, a man so focused on his job and political involvement, could be endowed with such great sensitivity and depth; he was convinced that that was exclusively his ‘Mother’s territory. [...] But perhaps [he] had misread him. Perhaps he did find a small landing place on the verses of al-Sayyab. Perhaps he did understand her’ (Matar, 2011: 27).

Love for literature runs through *The Return* as well, where it is mainly represented as both a source of pleasure and delight and a source of hope and consolation during the darkest times. For instance, Jaballa was particularly fond of poetry, as ‘a good line reassured him, put the word right for a second. He was both enlivened and encouraged by language’ (Matar, 2016: 65); in addition, the poems he knew by heart became his ‘comfort and companion’ when in prison, where he would recite them every night, as ‘knowing a book by heart is like carrying a house inside your chest’ (ibid.: 30). However, not only did he read and recite verses, he also composed some poems that he used to recite to Hisham only, when they were driving alone (ibid.: 65). Moreover, as Hisham discovers during his return trip to Libya, his father, when he

was a student, had written some short stories in which he expressed his own fears and preoccupations in a veiled form (ibid.: 134).

Poems can also be compared to a sort of glue that helps individuals to keep the pieces together when life challenges them. While in prison, over the years, Uncle Mahmoud managed to write poems and letters on a pillowcase and to bring it outside Abu Salim by 'sewing it to the waistband of his underpants'. When he shows Hisham the pillowcase, which is 'possibly the only surviving literature from all the countless volumes that have been authored inside Abu Salim prison', Hisham compares it to 'a diagram of the human anatomy: one letter in the shape of a kidney, another filling up a lung, a poem doing its best to occupy the gap between' (Matar, 2016: 274).

Uncle Hmad as well was a poet; his poems used to come to him in English, but of those he thought in prison, he cannot remember any; in fact, prisoners 'were not allowed to write anything down' and he had to destroy the letters he got from Jaballa, otherwise guards would have made him spend one day in hell (Matar, 2016: 272).

Literature is also a source of consolation for the author himself, who tells to have 'begun to read fiction in [his] spare time when [he] was nineteen – in fact, a few days after [he] had lost [his] father' (Matar, 2016: 136), while during the campaign he conducted for the liberation of Abu Salim prisoners the only thing he could read was poetry (ibid.: 187).

5.5 Matar and writing

In an article for *The New Yorker*, Matar tells about a book that he discovered at an early age and that seems to have influenced his future activity as a writer very deeply. Interestingly, he does not remember the title of this book, but only that, during one of those frequent gatherings in their house in Cairo with the political dissidents, it 'was on the coffee table, amid all the plates and cups and ashtrays [and] that it had a plain white cover, with no illustration'. Moreover, he has never read it, but he remembers having listened to some passages being read aloud during one of those social gatherings; in particular, he remembers 'the effect of the words reverberate around the room, making even the furniture [...] stir with inner life' and 'the new silence that the passages left in their wake. They created, at least temporarily, among these political men, who seemed [...] to function under the solid weight of certainty, a

resonant moment of doubt' (Matar, 2016: 1-2). Even if he cannot recall the precise words nor the content of those passages, what really struck him was the fact that

they relayed the intimate thoughts of a man, one suffering from an unkind or shameful emotion, such as fear or jealousy or cowardice, feelings that are complicated to admit to, particularly for a man. But the honesty of the writing, its ability to capture such fluid and vague adjustments, was in itself brave and generous, the opposite of the emotion being described. [He] also remember[s] being filled with wonder at the way words could be so precise and patient (Matar, 2016: 2).

In addition, this 'unknown and unknowable book' can also be seen as a symbol of Matar's activity as a writer. As if he were motivated by 'the enthusiasm rooted in that afternoon so long ago', in his books he depicts a wide range of emotions, by giving particular attention to his characters' weaknesses, faults and flaws, trying to stick to that 'honesty of the writing' that struck him so much in the mysterious book of his childhood (Matar, 2016: 2).

In Matar's books, male characters, and especially fathers, are depicted as figures that are at the same time an example of strength and power and human beings in the grip of fear and sorrow. Moreover, in *The Return*, Matar lays bare his own doubts, uncertainties and fears, going against 'the restrictive and stereotypical ways in which men have been culturally constructed both in literature and society [...], as [they] have been historically categorised as oppressors'. His writings invite readers to think about the fact that uncertainty and doubt are an integral part of human experience and that they know no gender distinction, as 'in the last fifteen years, theorists primarily from the disciplines of history, cultural studies, sociology and psychoanalysis have demonstrated that masculinity [as well] is broadly characterised by silences, crisis, uncertainty and invisibility' (Rowland, Liggins & Uskalis, 2000: 3-6).

In an article for *The Guardian*, Matar talks about his relationship with his writing activity and about the importance of including it into a routine so as not to lose focus and be distracted by 'the weight of various duties – email, post, a particular errand, the need to make yet another long distance call' (2017: 2). As he points out, writing requires complete dedication and

patience, as sometimes it might be satisfactory and sometimes it might be frustrating; in fact, writing so unpredictable that it

evokes a comb passing through tangled hair. Sometimes this leaves [him] with fewer words, and sometimes it extends them till, to [his] astonishment, [he] comes away with a thousand. Other days it all falls apart and [he] leaves in the negative. (ibid.:2)

Inspiration, like a butterfly, can come at any time and it is so fleeting that Matar 'must stand to one side, writing quickly, trying to catch the line of words that had just passed through [his] head [...]. Some are phantoms; others are valuable sketches that can become the basis for entire paragraphs' (ibid.: 1). This need to jot thoughts down immediately can also be found in *In the Country of Men*, where Faraj is used to writing down his dreams in a leather notebook he keeps under his pillow, within reach, so as to be able to chase them before they escape his memory (Matar, 2006: 84).

However, writing does not merely consist in jotting down ideas and organising them all together into a text; re-evoking the 'original observation' entails a lot of rewriting to try 'to recapture not only the movement and form of the butterfly but also its effortless naturalness, its authenticity and substance'. This can require a good deal of patience, because 'it is satisfying when [one] succeed[s], of course, but the pleasure is also in trying' (Matar, 2017: 2).

Moreover, as Matar writes, in his head there are two voices, each of them trying to push him in a different direction:

The first says write; the second hardly speaks, but I know what he wants. And if I let him, nothing would get done. He hovers at the edges. He is nowhere as strong as he once was (2017: 1).

The first voice represents Matar's willingness to continue the search for the truth about his father, to go on with the exploration of themes such as the absence of the father figure, the unstable political situation in Libya or the sense of displacement caused by exile. The second voice, instead, is clearly that of his father, whom Matar can sense whenever he seems to be going too far in his search, as if he were 'just behind [his] right shoulder, beckoning [him] away, [saying] 'Stop. Enough now'' (Matar, 2016: 127), to protect his son from the harsh truth of his fate.

In Matar's view, literature has the power to show how human beings, thanks to their sensitivity, can capture such overwhelming experiences and try to deal with and make sense of them. Thus, he has an optimist attitude towards literature, which represents a sort of democratic space where very different things can coexist, such as historical and political events and strictly personal facts (Tobagi, 2017: 2). Moreover, in this 'space' writers can project fears, sorrows, joys and uncertainties with which individuals can identify and feel what makes human beings humane, namely the sharing of common experiences in order both to find and provide comfort.

Then, Matar has a special way of conceiving the relationship between the author and his/her books. As he points out in an interview with Tobagi, the author is at the service of the book and does not use the book as a means to achieve his/her own objectives or to realise his/her own aspirations. On the contrary, the book already exists with its own 'personality' and it is the task of the author to grasp it. However, the author is not merely passive in face of the book; writing is a process that involves both giving and taking – the author makes his skills and sensitivity available to the book, and the book, in turn, 'writes' the author. In other words, writing becomes for the author a journey through personal and universally shared themes, a path of growth at the end of which he/she experiences euphoria and panic at the same time. Thus, the author, even if he/she is at the service of the book, experiences something Matar defines as 'the contrary of powerlessness', namely the feeling that literature can offer a space where intellectual growth and the sharing of emotions and experiences is possible (2017: 2).

Matar's way of conceiving the relationship between the text and himself reminds of Roland Barthes' ideas as expressed in *The Death of the Author*. In this essay, Barthes dismisses the traditional figure of the Author as pre-existing and feeding his book as a father would do with his child; instead, he proposes that

The modern writer (scriptor) is born simultaneously with his text; he is in no way supplied with a being which precedes or transcends his writing, he is in no way the subject of which his book is the predicate; there is no other time than that of the utterance, and every text is eternally written here and now (1967: 4).

Then, in Barthes' view, the text 'is a space of many dimensions, [...] a tissue of citations' where a final signification cannot be imposed. This definition applies well especially to *The Return*, which can be considered a 'multiple writing' where 'everything is to be distinguished, but nothing deciphered; structure can be followed, "threaded" [...] but there is no underlying ground; the space of the writing is to be traversed, not penetrated'. This refusal to assign a 'secret' or an 'ultimate meaning' to the text and the active role bestowed upon the reader are revolutionary, as they go against classical criticism, according to which 'there is no other man in literature but the one who writes'. In fact, according to Barthes, the reader is the place where the multiplicity of the text is collected, 'the very space in which are inscribed, without any being lost, all the citations a writing consists of. [...] He is only that someone who holds gathered into a single field all the paths of which the text is constituted' (Barthes, 1967: 4-6).

Conclusion

This thesis has tried to analyse the main themes running through Matar's works; in particular, it has attempted to explore how some central issues and characters appearing in *The Return* emerge in *In the Country of Men* and *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, and to what extent Matar's personal experiences, fears and hopes are refracted in his novels.

Against the background of Gaddafi's era, this study has started with the analysis of the fatherly and the motherly figures, to see to what degree the fictional fathers and mothers have been modelled on Matar's parents; it has passed through some central thematic features, such as binary oppositions and the importance of the sea for both the author and his characters. Then, it has moved on to explore the constant sense of displacement provoked by exile and the disappointment caused by the inability to connect again with the past and the native land. To conclude, it has focused on more formal aspects – genre distinctions and Matar's way of conceiving the art of writing – and on the power of literature and stories, both able to provide comfort and to save some precious testimonies that the course of history would inevitably engulf and forget.

Matar's works are not only a faithful representation of what it meant to live under the regime and be affected by its cruelty and pervasiveness; they are also an exploration of what it means to be human – to be prey to doubts, to try to cope with suffering and frustration, to long for the native country, to find consolation in art and literature.

To conclude, the author believes that 'literature [...] has a responsibility to represent social and historical processes. It needs to show us how we came here, and how we live. 'How to live?' seems [...] what all great novels ask' (The New Yorker, 2011: 4). In fact, his works, by following the vicissitudes of the three families disrupted by the regime, show how, in spite of all the difficulties and the suffering, it is still possible to go on with life and look at the future with hope.

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